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# **Stuart Hall and the Project of Marxism without Guarantees**

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**PhD research conducted in the Division of Sociology  
at the University of Northumbria**

**November 2004**

Abstract

This is the first full length study of Stuart Hall’s relationship to the Marxist tradition. It offers a new understanding of his shifting positions vis-a-vis Marxism and concentrates upon his prolonged efforts to renew its promise as a living body of theory and practice during the 1970s and 1980s. The contours of this renewal and its foundations upon a triple critique of reductionist, deterministic and universalistic tendencies within Marxism are laid bare in a series of expositions of his major works of these decades, linking these discrete interventions to this wider project. Following that, these are then subjected to an extensive critical review of their alternative perspectives upon the nature of social and historical processes and configurations, their potential political agents and the overall ability of this whole theoretical edifice to serve as a possible source for any future revival of the Marxist tradition. The conclusion is that Hall has not here fulfilled his promise.

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## **Acknowledgement**

This research project has been designed to build upon my earlier encounters with the works of Stuart Hall in the realms of political theory and cultural studies. It has been undertaken primarily to understand the broader theoretical context in which Hall's well known analysis of the likes of Thatcherism and cultural phenomena such as mugging were written, in particular his wider project of renewing the Marxist tradition.

By way of thanks the following all deserve a mention for their support: Andrew McCulloch and John Donnelly for their theoretical guidance and, on the domestic front Sharon, Matthew, Trudy and the settee.

## **Author's Declaration**

This work is submitted solely for the award of PhD and has not been presented in this form elsewhere. Materials from dissertations undertaken for previous degrees (BSc in Sociology, Newcastle Polytechnic 1990; MA in Cultural and Textual Studies, University of Sunderland 1995) have been drawn upon in this research.



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# INTRODUCTION

We are soon to reach the 50<sup>th</sup> year of Stuart Hall's intellectual career. Despite the length and breadth of his series of interventions across a number of different disciplines there has been scant attention paid to the overall nature and trajectory of this career. The first collection of articles reviewing his theoretical journeys did not appear until 1996, with the only full-length study so far attempted being published in 2003. On reflection this is something of a surprise. After all, Hall is one of the leading Left theorists of his generation, others in this cohort already being the subject of critical analyses of their careers (one shining example of this being Gregory Elliott's retracing of the vectors of Perry Anderson's shifting allegiances). Furthermore, Hall has the uncommon distinction of being the foundational figurehead for a whole new academic discipline, that of Cultural Studies, which has grown substantially in the decades since his ground-breaking efforts of the 1970s. Add in his wide-ranging intellectual scope and engagement in a number of social, political and cultural debates over the last two or three decades and it is clear that there is a theoretical corpus of significant proportions to be reckoned with here. What follows is designed to enhance our understanding of this legacy further.

The actual object of my investigation here is, however, somewhat narrower, concerning the relationship between Hall and the Marxist tradition within his overall career. As is well known, Hall is a writer keen to engage with a wide variety of intellectual approaches and individual thinkers in a spirit of "critical dialogue", upholding the open-ended nature of theorising against the ossification of dogmatic, closed positions. Within this polyphonic dialogue however the Marxist tradition has a central place as his initial point

of departure and subsequent resource for the elaboration of an 'open' and anti-reductionist framework to pursue both cultural studies and political analysis from. Some of Hall's most famous works – the analysis of mugging (*Policing the Crisis*) and of the challenges to the Left posed by Thatcherism (*The Hard Road to Renewal*) – are carried out from the perspective of developing a non-reductionist, alternative Marxist position, one that he described in the 1980s as a "Marxism without Guarantees". Such a project has thus far remained relatively unexamined, a gap my full-length analysis of its contours seeks to fill.

If the relationship between Hall and Marxism is relatively uncharted terrain, the nature of the Marxist tradition itself is far better mapped, in all its internal differentiatedness and in-house debates and conflicts. Hall's attempted renewal of this tradition certainly calls upon some of the major protagonists in these debates - Althusser and Poulantzas from the Structuralist wing and the work of Antonio Gramsci in particular. Their recruitment by Hall is guided by his concern to avoid a set of disabling tendencies that have recurrently disfigured previous Marxist approaches, and show how alternatives can be developed that move the tradition closer to its goals of critical analysis linked to the realm of political practice. My work here is structured around his efforts to achieve this renewal during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s. It is as well though to state clearly here the nature of these tendencies that Hall objects to. There are three such trends he identifies as theoretically limiting the promise of Marxism

1) *Economic Reductionism* – that is, the belief that the economic is the sole determining force or level in social life and political practice. Other arenas or practices, such as the political and especially culture, lack this historical effectivity and developments within them can only reflect in some way the pre-eminent processes underway in the realm of production. In Hall's view this one-dimensional approach has left Marxism unable to address the vital historical role played by these 'superstructural' factors in social and political life, licensing a political myopia focusing solely on the contours of economic development and its resulting class struggles, and neglecting the need to politically respond upon the political and cultural terrains.

2) *Determinism* – here there has long been a set of beliefs that some sort of historical guarantees are available to Marxist analysis and strategy, underpinning its concern for the objective development of economic processes and their maturing of class struggles, as dynamics inscribed within the 'course of history' and only needing to be recovered theoretically. This is a disabling myth according to Hall.

It seals off the tradition from that necessary concrete analysis of concrete situations and their range of operative and determining factors, which alone can serve to guide Marxism as an historically relevant theory. Politically it provides no links to the arena of contemporary political practices, with its collective agencies, that Marxist theory should to identify with and develop further.

3) *Universalism* – there has also been a tendency for Marxism to operate at a high degree of abstraction in its analyses, attempting to apply Marx's analysis of capitalism as a mode

of production in Capital directly to contemporary situations or invoke the sketch of the ‘march of history’ through a succession of pre-determined modes of production. Instead Hall argues we need to confront the current concrete situation in an open-ended manner, examining its new and novel phenomena and the range of determining factors that constitute its particular set of ‘objective conditions’ which Marxism must master theoretically and strategically.

Now Hall is not the sort of writer to state these guiding impulses in such a bald way in his works. I am here undertaking a reconstruction of his intentions for the purpose of framing the investigations that are to follow. However I think it is well documented in his texts that these are central concerns for Hall, and I hope to demonstrate this in my expositions of his works subsequently. Indeed I would also argue that this rejection of tendencies towards reductionism, determinism and universalism, serves as a guiding framework for all Hall’s works, including those undertaken outside the period and theoretical framework I am concerned with here, an issue I will take up again in the next chapter.

The structure of this work is as follows. Chapter 1 seeks to locate my interpretation of Hall’s relationship to Marxism in relation to existing treatments, arguing that we need to develop an alternative understanding than the currently available options. In doing so it also addresses the wider issue of the nature and contours of Hall’s entire intellectual career and its combination of intellectual continuities and transformations, hitherto underrepresented in the available commentaries upon Hall’s work. Following that, and having identified the works of the 1970s and 1980s as the central location of Hall’s attempt

to renew the Marxist tradition, the next four chapters provide detailed expositions of the major texts that illustrate Hall's project. We cover here many of the most well-known of his analyses – the CCCS cultural studies on youth subcultures and the mass media, the concrete political studies of the shifting contours of hegemony in post-war Britain (Policing the Crisis), and the treatment of Thatcherism as a potent ideological and political force – alongside the lesser known theoretical texts that frame these concrete investigations.

In doing so I will be endeavouring to show how they embody the rejection of reductionist, deterministic and universalist tendencies already discussed and point the way to a new theoretical framework for Marxist theory. This is one based upon an appreciation of the complex nature of social formations and their constitutive processes, the range of political options and historical outcomes evident in each concrete historical situation and the historically specific forms in which the concrete and its formative elements always confront us. The implication Hall presents us with is that it is only on the basis of this type of analysis that Marxism can hope to reconnect with contemporary forms of political practice.

My expositions are necessarily detailed and somewhat lengthy but there need be no apology for that. It is evident in the sparse literature on Hall's works currently available that his major works of the period I am concerned with have not received the required exegesis from their commentators. Certain reasons can be suggested as to why this is so. Often there is a predominant concern with the mobility and theoretical fluidity and transformations that Hall's entire intellectual career betrays, which takes the place of any detailed treatments of texts written from a particular theoretical perspective, or moment of

stasis, in his allegedly ever-changing theoretical framework (see the contributions of Grossberg and Fiske in Morley and Chen 1996). I want to make some critical comments upon this view of Hall's career later on. For others it is the complexity of Hall's concrete texts that prevent any full-scale treatment being appropriate – the view of Chris Rojek in relation to *Policing The Crisis*. I think neither of these views are persuasive and have set out here to correct the lack of detailed expositions Hall's works deserve if we are to fully engage with them and consider their merits. There is then an inevitable imbalance in what follows insofar as I have covered certain texts and issues in depth without being able to critically comment upon them to the degree they require. Perhaps others will be able to fill in these gaps.

Following the expositions there are four chapters covering at length the key theoretical positions of Hall's renewal of Marxism – his alternatives to universalism, determinism and reductionism in both its economic and class variants – as they are manifested in his concrete analyses. What I set out to show here is that Hall's alternative stresses upon historical specificity, contingency, the constitutive role of culture, and the new plural social order, do not provide us with persuasive and coherent theoretical frameworks from which to pursue Marxist analysis, despite their rooting in an accurate diagnosis of certain problems within the tradition hitherto. In a final chapter I take Hall's goal of reconnecting Marxist theory to the realm of political practice to task, in relation to the political implications of the works produced under the banners of 'complex Marxism' and a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. My conclusion then rounds things off by summarizing the main points of my argument and considers some of their analytical and strategic implications for the future development of Marxism.

# **CHAPTER 1**

## **HALL AND MARXISM**

### **1**

#### **Two Versions of ‘Hall – Marxism’**

Theoretically and chronologically the starting point for my investigations lies in a collection of essays by and about Hall published in 1996. They contain two distinct versions of Hall’s relationship to Marxism, providing both an initial point of departure and also serving to structure my subsequent investigations (Morley and Chen 1996). The first position is that of Hall himself who registers his relations with Marxism in terms of a ‘continuing conversation’, one that refuses to adopt an orthodox or dogmatic position, as part of his broader commitment to the open-ended nature of theorising, ‘theory as articulation’. Marxism, like other theoretical traditions, should be approached in the spirit of a critical dialogue, a resource to be quarried in response to the changing demands, the new material and intellectual challenges of a given historical conjuncture that require a reconfiguration (or ‘rearticulation’) of theoretical positions through the incorporation of novel theoretical elements.

“The problem is that it is assumed that theory consists of a series of closed paradigms. If paradigms are closed, of course, new phenomena will be quite difficult to interpret because they depend on new historical conditions and incorporate novel discursive elements. But if we understand theorising as an open horizon, moving within the magnetic field of some basic concepts but constantly being applied afresh to what is genuinely original and novel... then you needn’t be so defeated” (Hall 1996A p138).



“As a strategy, that means holding enough ground to be able to think a position but always putting it in a way which has a horizon towards open-ended theorisation... I am not interested in Theory; I am interested in going on theorising. And that also means that cultural studies has to be open to external influences, for example, to the rise of new social movements, to psychoanalysis, to feminism, to cultural differences. Such influences are likely to have, and must be allowed to have, a strong impact on the content, the modes of thought and the theoretical problematics being used” (Hall 1996A p150).

Thus as Hall says elsewhere “I’ve always been in conversation with Marxists, but I’ve never been in my life a classical, orthodox Marxist” (Hall 1995A p667). The necessary openness of historical development permits only an open horizon for any Marxist theorising, calculating the parameters of political action according to the given and shifting terrain of social processes and forces, engaging with new historical realities through the development of new concepts and explanations (Hall 1983A p83-84). The editors of this collection of essays support Hall’s vision of an enduring conversation with the Marxist tradition (Morley and Chen 1996 p3-4,19-20). [Two autobiographical accounts of this conversation can be found in interviews with Chen (Hall1996C) and Roger Bromley (Hall1995A)].

A radically different account of “Hall-Marxism” is found in the works of Colin Sparks. Within a larger narrative of the shifting allegiances between cultural studies and Marxism in post-war Britain, Sparks pinpoints only the middle years of Hall’s career as displaying any significant relationship to the Marxist tradition. Both the early New Left works and those of the 1990s show a dismissal of Marxism as a theoretical resource rather than any dialogue or conversation. In his early career Hall considered Marxism “an obsolete and reductionist system of thought” that prevented a full understanding of the changing social and cultural relations in post-war Britain (Sparks 1996 p78). Socialism would need to be

radically recast to address such a new historical reality, beyond Marxism (Sparks op cit p72-79). By the 1990s Hall had shifted away from Marxism to a quasi-Foucauldian position on the current historical situation, one characterised by a multiplicity of power relations and localised resistances in a consumer saturated and socially fragmented society (Sparks op cit 92-95).

In his middle, Marxist period Hall adopted the Althusserian framework initially in his CCCS works, whilst trying to retain previous humanist concerns for class-culture relationships within its complex model of the social formation and a vision of the subject as an unconscious social product. This was an unstable articulation that could not definitively decide upon the constitution of cultural forms (class related or ideologically autonomous) in its treatment of subcultures (*Resistance Through Rituals*). Nor could he secure any theoretical space for cultural struggles and active resistance in media analysis – hence the recourse to Gramsci (in *Encoding-decoding*). These core problems of determination and the positioning power of ideology recur in *Policing The Crisis* denying it any sense of theoretical synthesis (Sparks 1996 p77-88).

Hall's response to this impasse was a further appropriation, this time from Ernesto Laclau. Here however a move designed to overcome the weaknesses of Althusserian Marxism, ends up producing a break with the Marxist tradition per se by the end of the 1980s. Laclau's treatment of ideologies as semi – autonomous discourses composed of indeterminate elements opened up the space for ideological struggle and transformations ("rearticulations") but placed their structural determinations further in abeyance, licensing an idealist account of concrete ideologies, as seen in Hall's analysis of Thatcherism. The social subject was formed wholly in ideology (ignoring material

determinants) and within the realms of the dominant ‘people/power bloc’ contradiction rather than in class relations, reflecting the new multitude of social contradictions and the increasing importance of gender and ethnic identities. Through this appropriation Hall was moving rapidly to a post-Marxist position even whilst proclaiming to elaborate a ‘Marxism without Guarantees’ (Sparks op cit p 88-95). An idealist treatment of ideologies and identity formation coupled with a vision of the plurality of social relations (irreducible to class) shows the distance Hall has travelled from the Marxist agenda.

## 2

### **The Early and Late Works**

From an initial reading of a sample of texts drawn from across the whole of Hall’s career, neither of the above approaches seemed accurate. Those of the 1970s and 1980s are clearly concerned with elaborating a complex, non –reductionist Marxism drawing upon the works of Althusser, Gramsci and Laclau – a lengthy and sustained ‘conversation’. Whether Sparks’ reading of this ‘middle period’ is satisfactory is an issue to be investigated later. The works of the ‘outer periods’, the New Left years and the 1990s, are less clearly defined. A close attention to these texts shows however that neither Hall nor Sparks are reliable guides – and the exact contours of Hall’s relationship to Marxism remain to be established.

## 1) The Works of the 1990s

If we begin with the series of texts by Hall included in the Morley and Chen volume (written between 1986 and 1993) there are definite indications of his dissatisfaction with the Marxist tradition per se, rather than just its orthodox, reductionist versions (his previous object of critique). It is presented as irredeemably reductionist and unable to comprehend the complexities of contemporary society – the dynamics of social struggle, the phenomena of class – as the following quotes make clear. Sparks' treatment of this period as anti-Marxist reflects their theoretical position more successfully than Hall's 'conversation' analogy, which, as we will see, screens out the distance travelled from earlier positions he upheld.

*On the role of Marxism in Cultural Studies:*

“ There never was a prior moment when cultural studies and Marxism represented a perfect fit... there was always already the question of the great inadequacies, theoretically and politically, the resounding silences, the great evasions of Marxism...the encounter between British cultural studies and Marxism has first to be understood as the engagement with a problem...It begins, and develops through the critique of a certain reductionism and economism, which I think is not extrinsic but intrinsic to Marxism; a contestation with the model of base and superstructure, through which sophisticated and vulgar Marxism alike had tried to think the relationships between society, economy and culture”(Hall 1996B p265).

Previously Hall had maintained that it was possible to secure a non-reductionist Marxist approach within cultural studies, and develop the base-superstructure model in a similar manner. The complex Marxism he sought to elaborate in the 1970s and 1980s is premised on such a wager, as we will show at length later (see Hall 1974A, 1977A, 1980A, 1980C).

*On the conceptualisation of class:*

“ The moment you talk about globalisation, you are obliged to talk about the internationalisation of capital...the shifts that are going on in modern capitalism...so those terms which are excluded from cultural studies...when we were trying to get rid of the baggage of class reductionism, of class essentialism, need to be reintegrated; not as the dominant explanatory forms, but as very serious forms of social and cultural structure, division, inequality...which we just don't have an adequate conceptual language to talk about... I am sure that we will return to the fundamental category of 'capital'. The difficulties lie in reconceptualising class. Marx, it seems to me now, was much more accurate about 'capitalism' than he was about class. It's the articulation between the economic and the political in Marxist class theory that has collapsed” (Hall1996D p400-401).

In the 1970s however, Hall argued that a complex Marxism could grasp the articulation of economic, political and ideological processes involved in class formation through the application of Althusserian premises (see Hall 1977B).

*On the dynamics of social struggle:*

“Where classically, the terms of the dialectic grounds the complex supersession of different social forces, providing it with its governing logic...the dialogic emphasis the shifting terms of antagonism...It rigorously exposes the absence of a guaranteed logic or 'law' to the play of meaning, the endlessly shifting positionalities of the places of enunciation, as contrasted with the 'given' positions of class antagonism...The notion of articulation/disarticulation interrupts the Manicheism or the binary fixity of the logic of class struggle...as the archetypal figure of transformation”(Hall 1996E p299).

This shift in the metaphors used to capture processes of historical transformation (from 'dialectic' to 'dialogic') finds the classical Marxist paradigm on the wrong side; its crude notions of substitutions and reversal “startle us now with their brutal simplicities and truncated correspondences”(Hall1996E p288). And yet in the 70s and 80s it was precisely such a notion of 'substitution' that Hall deployed in his works to describe the strategic tasks facing the Left – class struggle, socialist renewal – and the successes of Thatcherism. He now denies this, retrospectively imposing the shift to 'the dialogic'

upon his mid 70's analyses of subcultures and their repertoires of resistance (Hall 1996E p293-295,299).

These quotes thus indicate Hall's break not only with vulgar, orthodox types of Marxism but with the whole tradition itself. In other contemporaneous works Hall lays out a new research agenda that covers both substantive areas of inquiry – globalisation, the trajectory of modernity, the processes of ethnicity, cultural identity and representation – and theoretical priorities. There is an increasing reliance upon post-Structuralist writers (Foucault, Derrida), previously rejected by Hall as at odds with the conceptual emphasis of complex Marxism (for example, Hall 1980B p71 on Foucault). His analyses of culture are now undertaken apart from any totalising perspective upon the social formation and its various practices, with the focus often shifting to relations between cultural and psychic dimensions of identity formation (Hall 1989G,1993B,1996K). A new conceptual ensemble registers this shift – difference, transgression, the diaspora, hybridity, the Other. Black cultural representation and ethnicity are now interrogated apart from their determining economic and political context and its political possibilities (Hall1996H, 1996J). The overarching logic of difference and 'dispersal' Hall sees at work here is one he argued against in the name of securing a position of relative autonomy (and the project of "Marxism without guarantees") from a slide into pluralism and parochial analysis only a few years before (Hall 1988B p51-53,70-71;Hall 1996G p11-16, originally written in 1985).

Given all this it remains something of a puzzle (not to say a distortion) that Hall continues to refer to a continuing ‘conversation’ with Marxism throughout his career in recent interviews and retrospective pieces upon his own theoretical trajectory (Hall 1995A), and that Morley and Chen endorse this (Morley and Chen 1996 p4). The conversational metaphor is in fact highly suspect and leads to a certain amount of deception. Beneath its blanket judgement of the Hall-Marxism relationship, Hall has been free to effectively rewrite the depth and coordinates of his engagement to match his current scepticism, a theoretical rearticulation that effaces past allegiances in the name of present dispositions (the latest articulation of theory he has adopted) at significant cost to the actual contours of this history. The treatment of Marxism’s impact upon cultural studies in Britain (and his own thought as Director of CCCS) portrayed above is a clear misrepresentation of the efforts of CCCS and himself to elaborate a non-reductionist problematic for cultural studies from the texts of Western Marxism in the 1970s, not to mention his subsequent project of establishing a “Marxism without Guarantees” from this basis (compare Hall 1992B with Hall 1980A). Hall’s rewriting should serve as a warning to those concerned to reconstruct his intellectual career and its various allegiances that his own (changing) word is not the gospel truth.

## **2) The New Left Works**

The precise relationship of Hall’s ‘New Left’ writings produced between 1956 and 1962 when he was co editor of *Universities and Left Review* and then first editor of *New Left Review* (henceforth ULR and NLR respectively), to the Marxist tradition is captured neither in Hall’s conversational metaphor nor Spark’s ‘pre Marxist’ designation.

It is evident from these texts that Hall is seeking to develop a version of ‘socialist humanism’ common to all adherents of the post-war New Left (Kenny 1995 p15-22,55-57) and to do so by drawing upon the core themes of humanist Marxism grounded in the works of young Marx – those of alienation, human agency and authentic experience (see Samuel 1989 p42-43,51; Rattansi 1989 p1-6; Soper 1990 p204-214). The ULR group sought to uncover the contemporary forms of alienation both within and beyond the realm of production, the cultural alienation of ‘passive consumption’ based upon narrow notions of human needs and capacities that marked consumer capitalism (Taylor 1958 p11-18; Samuel 1989 p51; Thompson 1958 p50).

As the editorial to ULR 4 made clear: -

“The task of ULR is to try to make some principled critique of the quality of contemporary life, and to take a perspective on the socialist and humanist transformation of our society... Our concern is with man, in the concrete richness and fullness of his life... all of it ...A critique of the quality of life in our society implies a conception of the singleness of human life, an awareness of its multiple facets and of its unity” (Editorial ULR4 p3).

This perspective opposed the currently dominant ideologies that abstracted economic man from the wider web of human relations he exists within in and stressed the centrality of social and cultural arenas for the expression of his creative potential and social nature. These were equally vital powers to be used in social transformation and the ‘remaking of life’ (op cit). Such an approach sought to supersede existing orthodox Marxism with its economistic, deterministic and universalist framework and revive the capacity of the tradition to ‘interpret and change’ the contemporary post-war world.

In ‘A Sense of Classlessness’ (Hall 1958A) the changing social and cultural contours of post-war Britain are described via a reorientation of the Base-Superstructure metaphor.



Hall now offers an analysis centred upon the interpenetration of objective and subjective determinants of class formation, including the emergence of distinct forms of cultural alienation and exploitation. This revision of Marxism and its famous spatial metaphor is underwritten by an endorsement of the centrality of alienation in the works of the young Marx, a theoretical move enabling renewed recognition of the ‘effectivity of the superstructures’ in social life (Hall 1958A p27,31-32).

Hall’s view is that class formation in post-war Britain has been radically affected by the historical growth of the realm of consumption which offered ‘new lifestyles’ to workers through the purchase of goods, and thereby eroded common perceptions of class and community. Such a cultural alienation (‘a sense of classlessness’) became a powerful obstacle to the renewal of socialism, superstructural forces and processes (the media, the advertising industry and the ‘false consciousness’ they relay) now directly affecting the course of events (Hall 1958A p28-29,31; Hall 1959A p51). In consumer capitalism, we were approaching that “complete alienation of man” Marx spoke of, with changing material forms in the realm of production being paralleled by new mental and moral enslavement within consumption, and a resulting acquiescence by people in their continuing exploitation (Hall 1958A p31;p26-32; Hall 1959A p50-52).

The humanist Marxist optic is then used by Hall in his contemporaneous political and cultural analyses – the ‘alienation of man’ serving as a unifying concept in his critique of capitalism across many social spheres (Samuel 1989 p43).

In the arena of politics Hall saw the future for Labour under Croslandite revisionism as guilty of reproducing the atrophied vision of human capacities shared by its Tory opponents. The rewriting of socialism to address the impact of the so called ‘managerial revolution’ and the benefits of reformed capitalism identified the ‘Good Life’ with economic prosperity alone, “a propertied interpretation of human needs” philosophically endorsing an alienated conception of man (Hall 1960 p4). A humanist socialist alternative would instead be based upon notions of community and equality, serving the full needs of the community including those currently unfelt and unexpressed within the working class (for education, meaningful work, etc) which could be given political form.

Hall’s first editorial for NLR 1 stressed this: -

“ The task of socialism is to meet people where they are, where they are touched, bitten, moved, frustrated, nauseated – to develop discontent and, at the same time, to give the socialist movement some direct sense of the times and the ways in which we live”(Editorial NLR1 p1).

In the realm of culture and its constitutive force in social life, the theme of alienation characterises Hall’s investigations of both elite and popular cultures. The then current concerns over youth culture and the ‘teenage revolt’ were read as indicative of a depoliticised response by a generation of working class adolescents to the stifling conformity and constraints of post-war British society, an antidote to the drabness of its worlds of work, education and mainstream politics (Hall 1959C p18). Their cultural alienation and exploitation was secured through the institutions of secondary modern education, inculcating a recognition of the social and class barriers to cultural development, hence their second-class status, and encouraging the growth of mass culture as a form of compensation. The “purveyors of mass culture” were thereby able to exploit and manipulate their “tastes, needs and interests”, producing the much noted revolt

against conformist adulthood (Hall 1959C p20). This revolt was, in fact, less one of age differences ('the Generation Gap') than a protest against the dehumanising condition of alienation in a bureaucratic and technologically dominated society that undermined human interrelations and spawned recurrent social problems: "What we find in the detail of teenage attitudes today is the distorted moral response to a bureaucratic age" (Hall 1959C p21). However this 'teenage revolt' was politically significant, one a renewed Left politics should relate to, harnessing its commitment to contemporary social causes (e.g. CND) and its more general radicalism, by linking its private discontents to the public world and progressive political movements (Hall 1959B p3-4; Hall 1959C p25).

As for elite culture, Hall argued that the relay between art and political commitment cannot be based upon its direct politicisation. A socialist humanist cultural politics should aim to restore the proper function of art, examining the links between culture and contemporary experience by translating the totality of human experience into artistic form. This was far removed from the then current state of alienation portrayed in the works of British intellectuals (Hall 1958B p14-15; Hall 1958C p86-87). 'Commitment' involved an endorsement of the specificity of culture, its dramatisation of human values and 'creative definitions' smothered in contemporary society and needing to be remade, rather than a crude reflection of the world (Hall 1961A p67-69).

## **Conclusions**

This review of Hall's early works clearly shows the inadequacy of their characterisation by both Sparks and Hall. They are not pre-Marxist as the former supposes, simply arguing against existing dogmatic versions of Marxism. They actually argue for a

humanist Marxist alternative, one charting the extent of alienation marking the human condition in post-war capitalism prior to its return to authenticity under socialism.

This was the dominant alternative to Stalinism and social democracy during these years, a dual critique of both 'East and West' (Rattansi 1989 p1-6; Soper 1990 p204-214). Sparks actually recognises this as central to the New Left in Britain, but his restriction of it to the works of EP Thompson, at the expense of Hall, seems a mistake (Sparks 1996 p75-80).

Hall's most recent retrospective verdicts on his early works continue to rely upon the conversational metaphor we have already encountered ("We were interested in Marxism, but not dogmatic Marxists" Hall 1996C p492-493) and thus do not reveal the actual contours of his first encounter (nor address the later shifts that occurred).

An earlier, more substantial assessment given at the thirtieth anniversary conference of the New Left by Hall moves us closer in some ways, although his main focus here is to foreground the political continuities existing between the New Left works and the project of a 'Marxism without Guarantees' he was then seeking to elaborate in opposition to Thatcherism. Their common concerns were the creation of a 'third way' socialist project (neither Stalinism nor social democracy), radically remade in relation to contemporary social conditions with no historical guarantees of success, and expanding the definition of the political to encompass diverse identities and experiences (in particular, those of 'the popular') and thereby gain mass support (Hall 1989C p150-153,169-170). It signalled a decisive break with reductionist, universalist and deterministic/bureaucratic Marxist traditions (Hall 1989A p16-17,24-26; Hall 1989B p133-134). What is absent here however is any strong sense of the theoretical differences between 1956 and 1986 in Hall's relationship to Marxism. The theoretical grounding of the early works in the

framework of socialist humanism and its discourse of alienation and the human essence is referred to only once (Hall 1989A p27-28), whilst the later central shift Hall makes theoretically in his ongoing dialogue with Marxism merits only a parenthetical appearance (op cit p16). This is, in fact, another instance of that theoretical rewriting of the past from the standpoint of the present we noted earlier, a 'rearticulation' that effaces past allegiances and obscures the actual historical shifts that have taken place.

There is however an explicit recognition of the theoretical insufficiencies of the socialist humanist analysis of culture and society, and an acknowledgement of a decisive break from it with the appearance of the texts of Western Marxism in the late 60s, in Hall's earlier narratives of the history of cultural studies (Hall 1980A, 1980B).

Here the humanist perspective was seen as limited by its essentialist visions of the social formation (as an undifferentiated totality united by a common praxis) and of culture (as directly related to social classes) as well as an accompanying naive belief in the human subject as the origin of culture, rather than an effect of the latter (Hall 1980A p28-31; Hall 1980B p55,63-64,66-69). With the availability of the key texts of Western Marxism (and certain non-Marxist continental theory) after 1968, and spurred on by the social and cultural conflicts erupting in advanced capitalist societies, a new alternative 'complex Marxism' formed, offering a richer theoretical vocabulary for cultural studies (and other analytical projects). This 'open Marxism' provided cultural studies with its own distinctive problematic, opening up new definitions of culture and its relationships to the wider social formation along materialist, non-reductionist and historically specific lines (Hall 1980A p 25-29).

It also enabled Hall to develop his own wider analytical concerns for a renewal of Marxism that framed his works of the 1970s and 1980s, providing a theoretically substantial basis on which to ground his earlier concerns for the constitutive role of culture in social life, the need for historically specific analysis, the anti-determinist rejection of historical inevitability and space for agency beyond the limited vocabulary of humanist Marxism. These could not be 'cashed' in the theoretical framework of socialist humanism Hall was relying upon in his early works.

As writers of the second generation of the 'New Left' argued, the framework of socialist humanism could not theoretically appropriate the diversity and complexity of social life through its central themes of alienation, agency and authentic human experience:-

"... the great themes at the core of this tradition, of humanism and alienation, are not, taken by themselves, adequate to grasping ...diverse social realities. Unless they are specified in the concepts with which Marx thinks the complexity of the social formation, these themes can just as easily lead to interminable philosophical ruminations...as they can to new knowledges of concrete problems" (Geras 1986 p120-121).

Similar concerns over the generality and ahistorical bias of this framework are made by Perry Anderson in his critique of E P Thompson (Anderson 1980 p25-29,56-58). And, as we have seen here, Hall's early works are open to the charge of being merely so many illustrations of an all-pervading condition of alienation, in economic, political or cultural form, one he later rejects for its simple view of the social formation and denial of the specific dynamics of each level (Hall 1980B p63-64).

## **An alternative perspective**

So then, the real relationship that Hall has displayed with the Marxist tradition is neither a single encounter flanked by non-Marxist periods (Sparks) nor a continuing and undifferentiated conversation (Hall). It takes the form of a definite tripartite trajectory beginning with the initial New Left attempt to update the tradition, in the light of changed social conditions, by relying upon the prevailing form of alternative Marxism, ‘socialist humanism’ as theoretical guide. Subsequently a later engagement with the series of Western Marxisms imported into Britain from the late 1960s (especially those of Althusser and Gramsci) offered the prospect of a more substantial grounding of his earlier critique of orthodox Marxism. The next two decades saw Hall attempt to develop an alternative ‘Marxism without Guarantees’ (a ‘complex Marxism’ based on a triple rejection of reductionism, determinism and universalism) that framed the analysis of cultural phenomena, political projects and historical conjunctures, and was designed to renew socialism as a political practice. It is this body of work (including the well-known treatments of mugging, Policing The Crisis, and of Thatcherism, The Hard Road to Renewal) that contains Hall’s major contribution to the Marxist tradition – and it will be my object of investigation in what follows.

By the 1990s however a definite shift away from this agenda is signalled by Hall, introducing a third ‘post-Marxist’ phase in his career. I have therefore retained the

tripartite model of Hall's intellectual trajectory developed by Sparks, without accepting his definition of each of its periods, and abandoned the unproductive 'conversation' metaphor offered by Hall. (1)

In focusing upon Hall's works of the 1970s and 1980s, the analysis offered by Sparks detailed above has provided a central point of reference. His thesis is of Hall as a full blooded Althusserian who then has recourse to Gramsci and Laclau to (unsuccessfully) extricate himself from the contradictions of 'theoretical anti-humanism', prior to abandoning the whole Marxist tradition. This can be challenged through a detailed reconstruction of Hall's textual encounters with Althusser and Gramsci. These show a selective (not wholesale) appropriation of the Althusserian 'problematic' and a far greater role for Gramsci than Sparks allows (see respectively Hall 1974A, 1977A, 1977B and Hall 1978B, 1978C, 1988A).

This misreading is apparent from the outset, as the content of the trio of Hall's texts that provide the theoretical foundations for his 'complex Marxism' show. His encounter with Marx's views on method, the configuration of the social formation and the processes of class formation display no simple Structuralist reading but rather a 'critical dialogue' established between Marx and Althusser. Hall endorses the Althusserian thesis of complexity of social formation (licensing an investigation into the 'relative autonomy' of culture) but rejects the philosophical rationalism, absolutist mode of critique and idealist reading of Marx's career Althusser upheld, in the name of defending Marx's positions on the linkage between theory and history and the nature of critique. (His own notion of 'theory as articulation' takes its point of departure from this critique of Althusser).



Secondly the role of Gramsci in Hall's attempted renewal of Marxism is far greater than the alternative theorist of ideology to Althusserian functionalism Sparks suggests. The analysis of British society in the post-war era begun in *Policing The Crisis* and extended to cover the 1980s and the triumph of Thatcherism in *The Hard Road To Renewal* constitute a major part of Hall's work during these two decades and they are fundamentally based upon the Gramscian conceptual framework. Their concern with the changing shape of the contours of class rule and resistance through a series of historical conjunctures (their varying modalities of hegemony, balance of 'the relations of force', and political / ideological interventions) reveal an appropriation of Gramsci far beyond a simple concern to make theoretical space for notions of ideological struggle. Hall also relies on this Gramscian framework to delineate the nature of any future socialist political project.

One feature that Hall's complex Marxist works do share with the wider theoretical appropriation of Althusser underway in Britain during the 1970s is their distance from any political engagement, a disarticulation of theory and political practice. As Alex Callinicos has noted there was a significant band of Marxist-aligned scholars actively seeking to revive the Marxist tradition in the light of the Althusserian intervention, creating an 'academic Marxism', a "semi-autonomous culture...unburdened by practical political commitment" (Callinicos 1982 p22). This gulf between theory and practice is one that we shall be returning to later, noting how the stated aims of Hall's self-portrayal as an 'organic intellectual' take a decidedly academic inflection, and how his distance from the realm of political practice inflates his sense of the importance of 'cultural politics' in socialist strategy.

This 'academic Marxist' culture has also however produced a body of critical work upon Althusser and Gramsci that I will be referring to later in considering the particular appropriations Hall takes from them, and their coherence and power as vital interpretations of Marxism.

As regards the theoretical content of Hall's 'complex Marxism' my detailed textual investigation have been supported by two recently published works containing a range of commentaries on Hall's career (2).

The collection of articles published under the title *Without Guarantees* (Gilroy et al 2000) do not make the Hall-Marxism relation a key area of concern. There are however a number of telling references to his efforts at developing a non-determinist version of Marxism relevant to the changing course of historical development and its political possibilities, a theoretical combining of the conjunctural and the contingent (McRobbie 2000 p216; Lewis 2000 p195).

Beyond this, a set of key themes are signalled by different contributors as characterising Hall's entire intellectual approach, ones that are highly significant in terms of the particular interpretation of Marxism as a theoretical and political position "without guarantees" that Hall develops in the 1970s and 80s. These are those of historical specificity, the role of contingency in determining historical outcomes, the reworking of theory in the light of changing material conditions, the centrality of cultural power and cultural politics (Brown 2000 p21,25; Scott 2000 p283; Morley 2000 p251; Giroux 2000 p134).

These themes are brought together and explicitly applied to Hall's interpretation of Marxism in the work of Francis Mulhern. He argues Hall's version of Marxism (and the

cultural studies it underpinned) is founded upon an attempt to grasp both the specificity and interrelatedness of culture and the concrete shape of its internal and external relations. This produces two defining themes of Hall's position – the establishment of culture as a site and modality of political struggle, and a strategic focus upon the concrete situation – that are underpinned by new notions of determination by the economic (now in the 'first instance' only) and of culture (as a site of struggle to fix meanings and articulate them to social subjects). In general, Hall favours conjunctural analysis predicated upon the contingency of its historical outcomes, a voluntarist strain of Marxism laying especial stress on the power of cultural practices and politics in the constitution and reconstitution of social relations (Mulhern 2000 p124-130).

Mulhern sees these themes as colouring all Hall's output, implying his relationship to Marxism is a continuous thread unifying his career (see his summaries of Hall's 'New Times' and 'New Ethnicities' analyses of the 1980s and 1990s, Mulhern op cit p114-124). For me they are better seen as a corpus of core themes Hall draws upon throughout his career within different and distinct theoretical frameworks. There is both continuity (the tropes of culture as a form of social power, of the contingency of historical outcomes, of historically specific analysis attuned to the particularities of the concrete situation and aiming to inform the realm of political practice) and change (the shift from 'humanist Marxism' through 'complex Marxism' to 'post-Marxism') evident in Hall's theoretical trajectory. In what follows I will be reconstructing the particular contours of Hall's 'complex Marxism' in the light of the theoretical priorities Mulhern and others have highlighted.

## **Later Interventions**

During the writing up of my research the first full-length study of Hall's output to be produced thus far appeared. Chris Rojek's book is concerned with the overall shape and trajectory of his career, rather than with my narrower focus on Hall's relationship with Marxism. Having said that, it does address the 'Hall – Marxism' question and provides both expositions and critiques of Hall's works of the 1970s and 80s that are my major concern here. We need therefore to consider Rojek's contribution to these issues.

## **Hall and Marxism**

Rojek is somewhat ambiguous in his delineation of Hall's relations with the Marxist tradition. He accepts Hall's recent portrayal of this relationship as an 'on-going conversation' with other, equally vital, alternative theoretical approaches also being engaged with in the formulation of a new and fluid 'problematic' for Cultural Studies, both during and after the CCCS years (Rojek 2003 p4-5,13-14,19,74-75). This conversation is not however extended as far back as Hall's early New Left works, which are not considered to be Marxist influenced (op cit p21-27,61-62). And yet, simultaneously, Rojek accepts the centrality of Western Marxism to the works Hall undertook in the 70s and 80s, whilst going on to chart his shift away from this framework to a post-modernist position relying on Foucault and Derrida by the 1990s, where Marxism is rendered absent (Rojek op cit p 3-7,158-159,162,177-185,197).

Clearly there is some degree of confusion here. To me it would seem more useful for Rojek to abandon the conversational metaphor used by Hall and register the definite shift from Western Marxism to post-Marxism Hall's works of the last three decades display, one his concrete analyses of these works amply demonstrate. There is no need to hold to the 'arms-length' version of 'Hall-Marxism' upheld by Hall himself and ex-CCCS colleagues (Morley, Grossberg et al) which, as I have already demonstrated, is imprecise and distorts Hall's shifting relationship to Marxism.

### **Analysing the works of the 1970s and 1980s**

Rojek provides a set of clear and concise expositions of Hall's major works of his complex Marxist period. These are divided into two strands – those concerned with 'Representation and Ideology' and the concrete analyses of 'State and Society'.

Overall, Rojek is keen to demonstrate the anti-essentialist approach Hall develops here.

Social processes and structures are envisioned by Hall as multi-layered 'complex unities' characterised by historically-specific constitutive forces or 'moments' (Rojek 2003 p106,109-110,117-118,120,134-135,138). Cultural arenas and the modalities of representation and ideology are seen as similarly complex in their formation (op cit p91-92). Furthermore there is an increasing recognition of the contingent and open-ended nature of social and cultural processes, a theme Hall takes over from Gramsci and amplifies further with his later appropriation of Laclau and Mouffe (op cit p86,111,125-126). These preferences for anti-reductionism, anti-determinism and historical specificity as theoretical guidelines are central to my own interpretation of Hall's 'complex Marxism'.

There are however some crucial errors in Rojek's expository efforts. In the first place, insufficient attention is given to the range of cultural studies Hall undertook at CCCS, their attempts to explicate the 'double articulation' of cultural forms and processes represented here only by Encoding-Decoding and a truncated version of the analysis of youth sub-cultures in *Resistance Through Rituals*. I will return later to the extra dimensions of the 'relative autonomy' of cultural forms Hall offers in his Birmingham works. These include analysing the contradictory relations between superstructural institutions (media and state) in their structuring of public opinion (Hall 1972A, 1981B); the shifting nature of the cultural relations of domination and subordination in post-war Britain, bound up with wider social changes, and their impact upon youth sub-cultural practices (Hall 1976A); and the role of signification and cultural codes in the classification of social reality (Hall 1973C).

Rojek's discussion of Hall's analysis of Marx's 1857 Introduction takes too narrow a focus upon this cornerstone of Hall's whole renewal of Marxism, restricting this text to a foundational role in the elaboration of a non-reductionist approach to culture only (Rojek 2003 p104-108). What is missing here is its influence in developing a non-reductionist treatment of social formations and their key processes (of class and cultural formations) that is central to Hall's works of the subsequent years. Besides this, Hall's reading contains two key arguments on the external relations between theory and the realms of historical and political practice. Rojek pays significant attention to Hall's efforts at continually rearticulating his theoretical framework in the light of new discourses and social phenomena, and relating his work to its surrounding political context. Yet it is in his reading of the 1857 Introduction that Hall first formulates these commitments to the

articulation of theory and history and the non-identical relations between theory and political practice, in his defence of Marx's mode of theoretical work over that of Althusser. As I will show, the 1857 Introduction provided not merely a cultural model, but also a sociological, theoretical and political model for Hall.

When detailing Hall's treatment of class, Rojek is far too generous and uncritical. Noting his appreciation of the fragmentary and contradictory nature of contemporary classes, and the proliferation of other social antagonisms in modern Britain, Rojek effectively lets Hall off the hook from the charges that he ignores class analysis in his treatment of Thatcherism (Rojek op cit p118,131-132; Hall 1988A p4-6). Now Hall had laid down an elaborate template for analysing the complex formation of classes and class struggle in his CCCS years (Hall 1977B), yet this was effectively downplayed in later concrete analyses of British society and politics during the next decade. Why was this – was it too simplistic to cope with an increasingly complex 'concrete situation'? If so, why was no effort made to address this by Hall? These questions remain to be answered.

Despite this, Rojek has provided the best treatment of Hall's works of the 70s and 80s so far. He is far more convincing in reflecting the differing contributions of Gramsci, Althusser and Laclau and Mouffe than was Sparks, and offers concise summaries of their respective theoretical offerings to Hall's project (Rojek op cit p108-127). My own work here seeks to deepen further our understanding of these works and their ability to serve as a basis on which to renew the Marxist project.

## **Rojek's Critique of Hall**

Existing accounts of Hall's work are too uncritical of its positions and theoretical preferences according to Rojek, a defect he relates to their authors' personal familiarity with Hall during the CCCS formative years (Rojek op cit p ix-x,8-11). He sets out to correct this and offer a more balanced, critical appraisal. This aim is however, unrealised in Rojek's critical comments which are often too generous or incomplete in their tracing of Hall's theoretical and political weaknesses.

Rojek is at his strongest as a critic when discussing the relationship between theory and political practice embodied in Hall's works. He describes Hall as an intellectual labourer seeking to make his work politically relevant through articulating contradictions in the body politic which are conducive to social change (Rojek op cit p 2-3,18). The self-conception of CCCS as 'organic intellectuals' is shown to be a similarly academic mode of practice that overstated its political role, an abstract social criticism lacking any coherent political strategy, or sense of a viable agent, and divorced from daily practical political intervention. In it, the preference for social critique over concerns for social reconstruction or policy proposals is marked, and damaging (op cit p 18,76-83). (Rojek's comments on the political void present in Hall's post-Marxist works are equally, and rightly, derisive – see p 193-198).

What lets Rojek's critique of Hall's 'articulation' of theory and political practice down, however, is his failure to push this line of enquiry further. He acknowledges the practical gap existing in Hall's position but then accepts Hall's alignment of his stance in the face of Thatcherism (conjunctural analyst telling hard truths to the left at a time of reactionary domination) with that of Gramsci (Rojek op cit p108-109). Yet Gramsci was (prior to his



imprisonment) a political actor (head of PCI) seeking to relate his analysis of cultural power, historically-specific forces and their conjunctural interplay to a form of practical intervention that could construct a counter-hegemonic force through the effort of party activists. He was not an academic observer of ideological struggles and re-articulations. There are a set of 'hard truths' to put to Hall here concerning the political strategy he advocates in response to Thatcherism, which Rojek, through his acceptance of Hall's adoption of the arguments of Laclau and Mouffe, fails to make. I will return to these at length in the course of my investigations.

In place of these themes, Rojek falls back on some narrow, reformist-type critiques of Hall's vision of emancipatory politics. He argues that Hall's current concerns are actually historically out of step with the contemporary contours of the modern form of the social. A rapidly globalising world has radically diminished the potential of the nation-state to implement the anti-capitalist, redistributive policies Hall advocates in his recent critique of New Labour as another version of Thatcherism (op cit p153-155). Nor is there any evidence that the electorate want such an alternative, a telling sign of Hall's separation from the preferences of the 'national-popular' he still harbours hopes of transforming (op cit p155). And furthermore, Hall's vision of the future social order and the means to achieve it are still depressingly vague – forging solidarity out of 'difference' and temporary identities (op cit p192-198). These comments indicate, to me, as much a capitulation to a capitalist future on Rojek's behalf as they do Hall's political failings – which are real and enduring, even if mis-described by Rojek who, incredibly, defends New Labour against Hall!!

The second main line of critique Rojek mounts centres on Hall's theoretical practice. He describes the shifting intellectual alignments and appropriations Hall's work displays as evidence of a synthesising and restless mind that is constantly engaging in critical dialogue with different perspectives in order to decipher contemporary relations of power, inequality and, in particular, their cultural representation (Rojek op cit p11-20). However this theoretical mobility has led to two major problems. Many of Hall's favourite concepts are not satisfactorily defined and exhibit a strong degree of imprecision and ambiguity that allows Hall to play 'fast and loose' with them, avoiding the rigours of any empirical testing of their particular claims (op cit p11,100,114-116,123). The range of Hall's borrowings and their somewhat cavalier intermingling produces a strong tendency towards theoretical incoherence in many of his works. Examples of this are the Gramscian versus Althusserian themes in *Policing The Crisis* (turning on the relative autonomy granted to civil society and the scope of ideological struggle) and the marriage of 'socialist' politics with postmodernist treatments of identity in the works of the 1990s (see op cit p138-140,145-146 and p17,31-33,87-89 respectively).

Rojek's concerns here are valid although, again somewhat misdirected. The notion of theory as articulation Hall developed from his reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction held that the very meaning of the theoretical element borrowed was transformed through its rearticulation in a new conceptual ensemble (see Hall 1977D p39-40). Thus it is not enough for Rojek, like Sparks and Dworkin before him, to register the existence of concepts with divergent points of origin when their sense is altered in new surroundings. We need to go further and consider the degree of malleability possessed by cultural

elements, and beyond this, to address the underlying model of the indeterminacy of the sign and its arbitrary relationship to its referent bequeathed by Structuralism to Hall, Laclau and many other advocates of the 'discursive turn' in social and cultural analysis. A definitive treatment of this whole topic is still awaited.

On the issue of conceptual imprecision and empirical testability, there is a growing band of critical commentary focusing upon the lack of empirical verification for many of Hall's analyses and their bold theoretical-political claims. Rojek notes the dispute over the popularity of Thatcherism (op cit p150-152), but others have drawn attention to similar problems in Hall's media analyses (Miller 2002). The conclusions to *Policing The Crisis* on the political role of black mugging as a divisive force amongst the British working class and the popularity of the market for future socialist calculation noted in *The Hard Road To Renewal* are similarly unsubstantiated. I will return to consider both of these and the drastic political implications Hall draws from them subsequently.

Perhaps Rojek would be better served following the line of enquiry he starts in relation to Hall's appropriation of Gramsci, uncovering its specific theoretical weak-spots, rather than searching for incompatibilities between theoretical borrowings. He argues that the Gramscian approach has a built-in tendency towards theoretical mobility in its portrayal of history as a series of unique conjunctures, a theme Hall's notion of theory as responding to new social and cultural phenomena through its own reconfigurations also embodies (Rojek op cit p12-13). Its portrayal of these conjunctures as complex unities with multi-layered constituent moments also encourages an avoidance of empirical testability, shifting the particular issue from one layer to another in response to critiques of its preponderance/significance, or lack of it (op cit p36-39,140,152).

These seem fair enough claims. Why then doesn't Rojek go on to chart the far larger problems embodied in the work of Laclau and Mouffe that Hall turns to? There is a wide body of critical literature highlighting the fundamental weaknesses of their analyses of social and political processes as discursively constituted hegemonic articulations that is certainly relevant to consideration of Hall's treatment of Thatcherism, notwithstanding Hall's own attempt to rein in their idealism by retaining a base-line of material limitations upon the powers of discourse (see Hall 1988A p140;1996A p147). Where are the references to the works of Nicos Mouzelis, Norman Geras, Ellen Wood and co in Rojek's account? Their absence indicates a serious mistake. Rojek is far too uncritical in considering the 'discursive turn' in Hall's work and the broad range of problems it spawns. His discussions on the problematic nature of Hall's contemporary political preferences – forging solidarity out of difference and mobile, hybrid identities – would benefit from a familiarisation with the earlier critiques of Hall's 1980s Marxist efforts to unify the plurality of oppressed social forces along the incomplete guidelines laid down by Laclau and Mouffe. We will return to these too, later.

## Notes

1. This periodisation of Hall's career leaves in abeyance those works produced in the mid 1960s, between the 'humanist Marxist' and 'complex Marxist' periods. Both Hall and Sparks depict this as a time of transition in his intellectual development, a search for a new conceptualisation of culture in the early years of the CCCS (founded in 1964, with Hall becoming its Director in 1968) that took him through many theoretical paradigms in an attempt to reach a viable non-reductionist approach, prior to the emergence of the key texts of Western Marxism in Britain post 1968 and their licensing of a complex Marxist treatment. On this issue Hall's most recent texts and his earlier histories of cultural studies are in agreement (Hall 1980A p20-24; Hall 1996B p266; Hall 1996C p499). Sparks notes the eclectic nature of Hall's work during this time, some displaying a markedly humanist bias (e.g. the 1968 May Day Manifesto to which he contributed) whilst others give a favourable reception to the anti-humanist Structuralist tradition (Sparks 1996 p79-82). I have found no reason to disagree with this assessment of Hall's mid 60s works and, therefore, intend to say no more about them in what follows on the 'Hall-Marxism' relationship.
2. There is another body of work relevant to this investigation that has *not* been included. This is a reconstruction of the theoretical development of CCCS by Lawrence Grossberg (1993) which I have found wholly unhelpful in its post-modernist disavowal of the veracity of the narrative which it constructs and the overly schematic portrayal of various stages and themes undertaken and upheld. There is more to be gained by paying attention to Hall's text in detail, backed up by the broad contours charted by Mulhern and co, than trying to follow Grossberg's convoluted 'narrativisation of war of positions'.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **COMPLEX MARXISM: THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF A PROJECT.**

The purpose of this chapter is to identify the theoretical coordinates underpinning Hall's 'complex Marxism'. These can be found in a trio of texts written in the mid 1970s that constitute his own 'return to Marx', disputing the recent Structuralist return to, and rewriting of, Marxism by Althusser and co. Here, Hall reassesses Marx's views on philosophy and method, the character of the social formation and its processes of class formation in order to furnish guidelines for this renewal. An analysis of these texts reveals Hall's relationship to Althusserianism is not one of simple identification as Colin Sparks presumes. Instead there is a critical dialogue set up by Hall between Marx and Althusser, through which he establishes the contours of his selective appropriation of 'theoretical anti-humanism'. Broadly speaking Hall endorses Althusser's vision of the complexity of the social formation but rejects his rationalist version of philosophy and critique (and the related idealist reading of Marx's career) in the quest to found a non-reductionist Marxism.

Methodologically, Hall's reading of Marx's '1857 Introduction' (Hall 1974A) provides the key principles for his 'complex Marxism'. He agrees with Althusser's estimation of the centrality of this text for the recovery of a viable Marxist philosophy and 'science of history' (Althusser 1969 p182-190; Althusser and Balibar 1970 p40-41,54,86-87,114-115). However Hall's reading of the content is significantly different, in particular in the realms

of philosophy and critique. From it he develops the master-concept of ‘articulation’ that will serve as a common base for theorising social formations, their constituent parts and processes, as well as the relationships between theory and the realms of history and political practice. This is then deployed in the two other texts under consideration here to chart Marx’s shifting characterisations of the social formation and its processes of class formation (Hall 1977A; Hall 1977B).

It should be noted that these foundational texts are not easily accessible for the reader. They were written in a dense theoretical language from within that academic Marxist ‘subculture’ described in the preceding chapter, and are replete with Althusserian conceptual jargon, references and in-house terminology. They are nevertheless the inescapable starting point for reconstructing Hall’s renewal of Marxism and therefore some effort must be made to describe their theoretical concerns. In what follows, I will try to “translate” as much as possible of their conceptual contours into a less forbidding language. Beyond this question of language there lies a more fundamental issue. As we saw in the Introduction, Stuart Hall’s self-conception of his work is one of a mobile and changing entity, a series of conjunctural interventions incorporating new theoretical insights and concerns. This would seem to preclude the type of enquiry and theoretical reconstruction I am attempting here, with its search for the foundations of an enduring coherent project. The secondary commentaries on Hall’s career currently available tend to support this vision of a fluid theorist, always responding to the new phenomena emerging in successive historical conjunctures. My reading of Hall’s works is therefore going very much ‘against the grain’. However I think there are strong grounds for attempting such an alternative, textually

confirmed by Hall's works of the 1970s and 80s, despite his more recent denials of the significance of Marxism to his previous works we have already seen. This excavation must begin with the complex theoretical edifice of Hall's reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction.

## **1**

### **The 1857 Introduction as Theoretical Cornerstone**

'Marx's Notes on Method: a reading of the 1857 Introduction' has recently been described by Hall as "long" and "rambling" (Hall 1996B p266). To me however it is in fact a tightly bound work, displaying a continuous concern formally to distinguish the nature of Marx's mode of critique (in relation to his intellectual predecessors, Hegel and Classical Political Economy) from that of Althusser and substantively to furnish a set of theoretical principles open to further development for a new, non-reductionist Marxist research project.

Hall begins by identifying a series of methodological baselines Marx establishes through his distinctive double critique of his intellectual forerunners. Tellingly, Hall starts with Marx's rejection of their universalist forms of abstraction, and his alternative vision of the socially determinate nature of phenomena, their specific historical forms, origins and determinate conditions. For example, the activity of 'Production' cannot be analysed in general, based upon presuppositions of the 'naturalness of individual producers', but only



through an attention to its historically distinct forms and results. Marx was thus concerned with the specificities of capitalist production, its dependence upon commodity production utilising labour power. This in turn entailed a move beyond universal abstraction to a degree of conceptual differentiation (Hall 1974A p 134-139). Only on this basis could Marx, according to Hall, penetrate the opaque structure of the capitalist mode of production and found a scientific analysis of it. At the outset then the desirability of an historically specific orientation is established.

Hall then moves on to the issue of conceptualising the relations between parts in larger wholes, where Marx's analysis of the circuit of economic production within capitalism registers a significant theoretical advance over his predecessors. Marx treated the different moments in this circuit as both mutually interdependent and possessing variable degrees of determination, depending upon their specific 'determinate conditions', with that of 'production' holding ultimate sway. The resulting model of social phenomena as complex unities, internally differentiated and articulated in historically specific forms, is one then taken by Hall as a *general* model for analysing social and cultural phenomena and their complex, concrete relations. Althusser's treatment of the social formation as an over-determined whole with relatively autonomous levels is seen by Hall as wholly in keeping with this perspective (Hall 1974A p144-146).

"This means that, in the examination of any phenomenon or relation, we must comprehend both its internal structure – what it is in its differentiatedness – as well as those other structures to which it is coupled and with which it forms some more inclusive totality. Both the specificities and the connections – the complex unities of structures – have to be demonstrated by the concrete analysis of concrete relations. If relations are mutually articulated, but remain specified by their difference, this articulation, and the determinate conditions on which it rests, has to be demonstrated, it cannot be conjured out of the air according to some essentialist or dialectical law" (op cit p147).

Here then are two fundamental principles used in Hall's whole project to renew Marxism presented in microcosm – that is, the complex nature of social phenomena and their historically-specific configurations.

This model is then applied by Hall to the nature of the relations between the realms of theory and history. He argues Marx offers an alternative approach to existing reductionist and idealist perspectives (those of historical evolutionism and Hegel), formulating an 'historical epistemology'. This considered both the distinctiveness and interrelatedness of the two domains, as well as the role of contemporary society as "the historical substructure to thought" (Hall 1974A p149). Hall reconstructs a midway position of 'structural historicism' that Marx displayed in his new epistemology, one lost in the current rationalist rejection of any relation between the two by Althusserianism. Indeed for Marx the historical grounding of epistemology in contemporary society (with its ensemble of relations determining the order, place and role of the categories of thought) licensed an open horizon for theory that the internally verified scientificity of Althusser's philosophy cannot match. Claims to any scientific status must rest upon both the historical fit achieved between theory and reality and the realisation of this knowledge in the practice of class struggle transforming this reality (Hall 1974A p148-157).

In defiance of the Althusserian reading Hall then goes on to argue that Capital itself is a site par excellence of this historical epistemology. Its well-known doubly stratified structural analysis of a mode of production (the phenomenal forms/real relations distinction) was actually contained within "the fundamental historical premise which frames the whole exposition..... the historically specific, hence, transitory nature of the capitalist epoch and

the categories which express it” (op cit p 159-160). So, for Hall, theory and history exist therefore in relations of ‘articulation’, a theme Hall makes extensive use of in his ‘complex Marxism’.

Finally Hall confronts the differences between Marx and Althusser in their practice of theoretical critique. Marx’s career is not one marked by an epistemological break from ideology to science to be secured through an absolutist critical practice. His double critique of Hegel and Political Economy was an ongoing dialogue practised within a wider social environment, whose social relations and forms of political practice significantly affect the practice of theoretical labour. This is far removed from Althusser’s idealist view of theory and critique. Furthermore, Marx’s recurrent returns to dominant ideological discourses were not attempts at a purely theoretical replacement. They were meant to effect a unity of theoretical labour with the revolutionary practice of class struggle, “a double articulation of theory and practice” (op cit p166) that constitutes yet another ‘complex unity’ (Hall 1974A p166-167). Althusser’s defence of the autonomy of theory as a practice safeguarded from external determination is therefore an idealist retreat from Marx’s approach. Instead the way forward, according to Hall, lies in an open-ended dialogue with other theoretical traditions and with the realm of political practice.

The related reading of Marx’s intellectual development as an ‘epistemological break’ from ideology to science Althusser pioneered in *For Marx* is taken to task by Hall in the other two texts under consideration here for the same idealism. Such a view of the process of theoretical labour neglected the impact of the surrounding social environment upon Marx’s

work. This social basis, as prescribed by the articulation of thought and history, was reflected in Marx's break with his early simplistic treatment of social wholes as consisting of identical or corresponding parts to one recognising their complex unity and historically-specific articulation. It was the historical failure of the revolutionary movement of 1848, their frustration of the expectations and causal mechanisms outlined in The Communist Manifesto of 1847 that led Marx to reconsider the lack of correspondence between multiplying economic antagonisms and the absence of its 'corresponding' political resolution. His theoretical turn was towards an examination of the non-identical, complex relationships existing between the different levels or moments of the social formation and processes of class formation. This was paralleled by a shift in political perspective from one anticipating 'immediate catastrophe' to a more structural-historical appraisal of the nature and trajectory of the capitalist mode of production. Both these changes were, in turn, governed by the external breakdown of the revolutionary movements of 1848 (Hall 1977A p54-56; Hall 1977B p19-20,27-28,39-40).

In Hall's own words:-

"Indeed, without simplifying the connection, we could say that the historical collapse of the 1848 Revolution produced a theoretical advance of the first order in Marx's understanding" (Hall 1977B p19-20).

This illustration of the methodological principle of the articulation of theory and history is then repeated by Hall in relation to the conceptual advances found in Marx's late political analyses of the 1870s – their external impulse being the sudden appearance (and disappearance) of the Paris Commune – and Gramsci's recognition of the 'effectivity of the superstructures', borne from his political and personal experience of the Fascist State in Italy (Hall 1977B p50,64-65).

## **The Complex Unity of Social Phenomena**

The guidelines extracted from the 1857 Introduction on theorising the nature of social phenomena as complex wholes are developed further by Hall in his reconstructions of Marx's shifting analyses of the social formation and its processes of class formation ('Rethinking the "base and superstructure" metaphor' Hall 1977A and 'The "Political" and the "Economic" in Marx's theory of classes' Hall 1977B respectively).

Here he traces the development of a new approach beyond the simplistic identity and correspondence between the constituent parts of complex wholes characterising Marx's early works, with their reductionist and politically catastrophist assumptions, towards an appreciation of their complex unity and historically specific articulation.

Hall charts Marx's advance in relation to Althusser's model of the social formation as an 'over-determined' whole - that is, a set of asymmetrically structured practices, articulated according to the formula of 'relative autonomy of the superstructures – determination in the last instance by the economic'. In this model each constituent moment of the complex whole has its own degree of historical effectiveness and determination (its 'relative autonomy') operating within any concrete situation ('the conjuncture'). Its specific character and interrelation with other parts of the larger whole can only be grasped in their historical particularity and form of articulation. This appreciation of complexity and

historical specificity is one that Marx's early views on the character of the social formation and its processes of class formation lacked (Hall 1977A p48-49,54; Hall 1977B p22-23). Furthermore for Althusser the over-determined nature of the social formation was vital to the foundation of an effective Marxist political practice. Only when the complexity of any concrete situation is recognised ('the structure of a conjuncture' with its multitude of social contradictions in historically-specific configurations) can the disabling simplicities of previous forms of Marxism (economistic, humanist, historicist) be overcome. There is no guaranteed correspondence of economic contradictions and antagonisms producing appropriate, progressive political and ideological resolutions as reductionist Marxisms supposed (see Althusser 1969 p94-106,179,202-209). This political verdict is one readily adopted by Hall as a theoretical principle of the highest order (Hall 1977A p71).

Hall identifies a series of similar themes existing 'in the practical state' in Marx's post 1848 works (1). They contained pointers towards a new theorisation of double determination (allowing scope for the effectivity of the superstructures within the over-determining influence of the mode of production), an appreciation of the need for concrete analysis (to grasp the historically specific articulation of the constitutive moments in social processes into complex wholes), and the birth of a new series of concepts to capture the specificity of superstructural levels (especially the political). What this implied was the recovery of a non-reductionist Marxism from Marx's later works, one that retains the Base-Superstructure metaphor but now reworked within the Althusserian framework of overdetermination (Hall 1977A p43-44, 60, 64; Hall 1977B p39-40, 47-49, 58-59). It also signalled the need to produce a distinct set of concepts for each moment or level of the social process under consideration, one able to capture their own particular mechanisms,

processes and forces. We cannot rely on concepts already developed to theorise other, so-called more fundamental moments. This issue is one Hall returns to in his construction of the theoretical foundations for cultural studies as a distinct discipline, as we will see in the next chapter.

In terms of the social formation Hall finds Marx's theoretical advance in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutionary defeats is contained in both his concrete political analyses of post-revolutionary France and in the more abstract characterisation of capitalism in *Capital*. These works contained an appreciation of the non-identical relations existing between the different levels of the social formation. The levels exhibit uneven degrees of determination, allowing a part to be both determining and yet determined by other parts in the larger whole. In relation to the superstructures, Marx examined the variety of ways in which they operated vis-à-vis the reproduction *or* retardation of developing capitalist social relations, their increasingly complex forms and the possible historical necessity of their non-immediacy, or 'relative autonomy' (Hall 1977A p50).

Hall's predominant focus falls on the concrete analysis contained in 'The Eighteenth Brumaire' (1852), where Marx provided a compelling analysis of the concrete impact of the political level upon the resolution of a general social crisis and its significance for the future development of French capitalism. The accumulation of economic contradictions in 1850s France did not govern the precise contours of its political conjuncture according to Marx. They provided merely a limitation on the 'repertoire' of political solutions that emerged and declined in rapid succession in this political crisis, prior to the appearance of

the Bonapartist resolution. It was the coexistence of previous modes of production in French society (with their own class forces struggling for political power) and the specific relations, processes and forces of the political level, with their range of relatively autonomous regimes, that were equally significant for the historical outcome. Further, Marx argued that the particular political form that resolves this crisis (the Bonapartist state expressing an equilibrium between fundamental classes) had a profound role to play in the future development of French society. Its expansion of the state machinery became the specific form in which French capitalist relations are subsequently reproduced (Hall 1977A p55,58-60; Hall 1977B p47,52).

Hall finds a second guide for the development of a non-reductionist Marxist theory of the superstructures in Capital's discussion of the non-identical relations existing between the moments of the economic base. There are different degrees of determination exercised by the moments of production and exchange, and Marx famously described their articulation in a 'complex unity' through the "phenomenal forms/real relations" couplet. Hall suggests this offers a promising model for contemporary Marxist approaches to the superstructures showing their nature as both determined and necessary - they are not empty ideological forms (Hall 1977A p61). Marx showed how these relations within the wider circuit of economic production were characterised by a 're-presentation' of unequal and fundamentally determining production relations through the apparently equal, free and dominant market relations of exchange. The latter 'phenomenal forms' then provided the basis for everyday economic activity, for civil society as a whole and its political and ideological superstructures (Hall 1977A p62-64). These superstructures were therefore both determined and yet determining, part of a complex whole in which they have definite and



irreducible effects, processes and relations that contemporary Marxism must uncover further.

Hall notes however that Marx's successors have not provided many theoretical advances here. The works of Gramsci and Althusser are exceptional, and Hall makes extensive use of them in his renewal of Marxism as we shall see. In particular, Gramsci's recognition of the arena of popular ideologies found in civil society, and their political impact, becomes ever more significant for Hall as he later confronts the rise of Thatcherism.

As for the processes of class formation Hall draws on Poulantzas' critique of historicist and reductionist versions of Marxist class analysis in outlining Marx's theoretical shift towards its complex and historically specific modes. Poulantzas' work is, as is well known, an application of the basic premises of the Althusserian vision of social phenomena as complex unities to the issue of class formation by the most famous of Althusser's collaborators and followers.

A brief summary of his main arguments is appropriate here. Traditional perspectives on the formation of classes as homogeneous wholes with pre-given interests, constituted at the economic level and then 'expressed' in political and ideological struggles, are abandoned by Poulantzas (Poulantzas 1973 p60-64, 76-77,87-88). Rather, our attention was drawn to the complex and historically specific processes at work here. Each relatively autonomous level of the social formation has an impact upon their structural constitution, whilst the powers and interests a class has are established only upon the changing and conflicting terrain of class struggle, rather than being pre-given (op cit p64,69, 89-93,97,105-114). Within this array of constitutive forces, Poulantzas was especially concerned with the role

of the political level and its intervention to both organise and disorganise fundamental social classes in the wider struggle for hegemony, through the institutions of the state (Jessop 1985 p60-70; Benton 1984 p141-149). Such a dynamic, in turn, could only be comprehended through developing a specific series of concepts to grasp its particular configuration and processes - such as those of 'power bloc', 'class fraction', etc (Poulantzas 1973 p16-18,86-87).

Crucially, the arena of class struggle and political conflict could not now be read in terms of a simple Capital – Labour confrontation. In any conjuncture, a complex array of class forces and political movements were active, due to the non-coincidence of structural determinants (creating distinct class fractions and strata) and shifting class alliances bidding for political power (Poulantzas op cit p70-73,93-96). Political representation was also a plural process, shorn of essential class–party links. Alongside fundamental classes and their political organisations/ideologies, other classes and class fractions could be 'represented' in state apparatuses and political parties that also simultaneously represent alternative class forces. In sum then for Poulantzas, class organisation is complex, indicative of a non-coincidence of economic and political levels and processes (Jessop 1985 p155-156,186-188).

Now in Hall's reading, Marx's early discussions on class formation are clearly vulnerable to Poulantzas' critique (Hall 1977B p20-26). His later works however, do show a greater appreciation of the complex unity and historically-specific forms that the constitution of classes and class struggle exhibit. They pointed the way forward to a "non-homogeneous conception of classes" (op cit p56) where no essential correspondence between the

economic and the political as constitutive moments exist (op cit p24-26). The concrete political analyses of French society written during the 1850s and 1870s were, once again, the major site of Marx's advance. Even in *Capital* though, new departures from the linear reductionist view of class formation present in the *Manifesto* were found. These interrupted its vision of economic development simplifying class antagonisms and producing an increasingly dichotomous class struggle expressed in political conflict (Hall 1977B p20-21).

Here Marx showed us how the economic advance of capital contains trends towards both class unification *and* new divisions, and that this process was also open to determinations flowing from the political class struggle. For instance, in the wake of successful struggles by the proletariat to limit the length of the working day, capital was forced to respond with increased levels of concentration and mechanisation, which ultimately precipitated a new phase in the overall development of the mode of production (Hall 1977B p30-36). Hall's identification of class divisions flowing from the process of capitalist development is a theme that recurs in his own concrete analysis of youth subcultures and Thatcherism we will cover in subsequent chapters.

According to Hall, in his mature political works Marx began to elaborate a series of concepts that register the 'specificity of the political' in the processes of class formation (Hall 1977B p39-40). Through these he showed us the particularity and effectiveness of the level of political class struggle, charting its internal configuration and historically specific forms of combination with the economic, its impact upon the rest of the social formation

and contribution to the constitution of classes as historical forces. This is all done in a manner consistent with Poulantzas' approach (op cit p46-49).

'The Eighteenth Brumaire' (1852) laid down a formula of 'objective conditions determining the limits of political resolutions' to grasp the range of political projects characterising the 1851 crisis in France and to account for the plurality of class forces currently contending for political power. The coexistence of newly dominant and declining modes of production within the social formation provided the objective limit for this political trajectory (Hall 1977B p40-41). Its succession of political regimes bidding for power represented the various attempts of particular class fractions in shifting alliances to secure hegemony. Marx here therefore signalled the complexity of the realm of political class struggle, with its class fractions and intermediate classes combining and recombining in alliances and blocs, and actively becoming political and ideological forces (op cit p41-43). It is here, in this domain that class interests and class powers were, and still are, established and fought over.

In his discussion of the modalities of political representation Marx now highlighted the transformations and 're-presentations' effected by its political forms and relations upon class forces and their interests. A particular class fraction's interests could be re-presented through the role of another fraction in the political theatre. Marx argued the 'social-democratic party' in the 1851 crisis was a coalition of proletarian and petty-bourgeois class fractions which both advanced their interests whilst re-presenting those of the former towards a solution of democratic reform within capitalist limits.

As for the ultimate victor, Louis Napoleon, whose Bonapartist coup d'état brought the crisis to an end and installed an enduring regime, Marx argued that its apparently neutral

state form had a complex social base. It both reflected the stalemate existing between fundamental classes, whilst resting its political claims upon the peasantry. As a declining class unable to represent itself politically, the peasantry found an outlet for its discontents in the Bonapartist dictatorship. This mode of representation however only furthered the development of capitalist production relations in French society that was already undermining the peasant way of life. And it was this dynamic that signals the objective role played by the expanding Bonapartist state for French capitalist development, one masked by its specific mode of political representation apparently independent of any fundamental class interest (Hall 1977B p43-46). This recognition of the specific powers contained in processes of political representation was to be taken much further in Hall's works on Thatcherism, an extension that dislodges the balance between objective and subjective aspects of the 'concrete situation' Marx here establishes, to detrimental effect as we shall see.

Hall concludes that, in the complex unity of classes and class struggle, and in relation to the trajectory of the whole social formation, the realm of political class struggle is crucial. Through distinctive forms and relations, classes struggle to elaborate and secure their own interests and powers, aiming to ultimately dominate the entire social formation and become historical forces. This is no pure 'Capital versus Labour' conflict. It involves complex class alliances and blocs amongst a plurality of existing forces, and distinctive modes of representation that politically and ideologically modulate their 'class interests'. It is a practice centred upon the attainment of state power, which is the institutional site for this 'over-determining level' of class struggle (Hall 1977B p49-54).

As a contemporary illustration of the complex processes of class formation, Hall refers briefly to the unfolding political conjuncture in Britain. In a deepening economic crisis, it was a Labour government repeating the characteristic tendency of Social Democracy to serve both Capital and Labour by raising its own powers to that of the ‘general interest’ – at the expense of Labour. On the other side, the Thatcher leadership prepared for power through creating “an authoritarian popular consensus”, representing capital in the ideological disguise of the petty bourgeoisie (Hall op cit p57). This conjuncture and its complex modalities of class formation and political representation is one that Hall returns to in depth, in his famous analysis of the ascendancy of Thatcherism and the challenge it poses to the Left. Quite whether the conceptual apparatus developed here is applied in full in this series of later interventions is an issue we will consider further in Chapter 8.

### **3**

## **Coordinates for a Complex Marxism**

From this trio of texts we can extract a set of theoretical foundations that guide the series of works Hall produces over the next decade and a half, in the attempt to furnish a revitalised ‘complex Marxism’. These diverse investigations encompass the realms of culture and ideology, the state and political formations, as well as those dealing with the contours of the current political conjuncture in British society and its new social and political phenomena (such as mugging and Thatcherism).

These are:-

1) The complex particularity of social phenomena

Social processes are always complex wholes, composed of many specific and effective parts, structurally interrelated into a 'unity-in-difference' and always appearing in historically-specific forms. These processes are in turn, often connected to other, larger wholes. The relationships existing between the constituent parts of complex wholes are non-identical and non-essential, lacking any necessary structural or historical guarantees. They are particular and provisional 'articulations', specific forms of combination we can only theoretically discover through concrete analysis, rather than deduce from any universalist typology. Only in such a way can the analysis of a social formation, or any of its constituent levels of core processes (for example, class formation), be undertaken. In considering the nature of such phenomena, each of its 'relatively autonomous' parts has to be analysed through the elaboration of a distinctive set of concepts. These must be attuned to its particular forms, relations and processes, designed to capture its specific effects, outcomes and their impact upon other parts of the larger whole. We cannot rely on conceptual apparatus already developed in relation to other 'more fundamental' moments of the theoretical object in question.

This theoretical position stands midway between the two unacceptable alternatives of reductionism and pluralism. The former presumes a necessary correspondence or identity between the parts of wholes, ignoring the specific determinations each part possesses by reading one, or more, as derivative of some more fundamental part. The latter registers the specificity of each part but neglects their relations to the other parts with which it forms a complex whole, a position of necessary non-correspondence. For Hall both the internal

specificities of, and forms of external connection and combination between, the constitutive parts that make up complex wholes must be grasped in their historically particular configurations. This argument is one he repeatedly returns to in his analyses of cultural processes and racially structured social formations.

## 2) The articulation of theory and history

The moments of theoretical development and critical practice are similarly characterised by their specific internal configurations and insertion within the wider social formation, with its range of active determinants (forms of political practice, new social phenomena), in shifting, specific articulated unities. As a double critique of forms of reductionism and idealism, Hall licenses the production of a new model of intellectual development, theory as articulation. This foregrounds the need to conceptually respond to new and changing historical conditions (in order to secure theoretical relevance and political effectiveness) rather than create a closed, dogmatic system. It also redraws the nature of critique, towards an on-going and accumulative practice of critical dialogue with new and existing theoretical discourses. We are here decisively moving away from any single absolutist break into a science, subsequently sealed off from further internal and externally-prompted dialogues or development. Hall's own narration of the development of cultural studies as a discipline up to the time of his departure from CCCS clearly follows the above parameters (Hall 1980A; Hall 1980B). And his later retrospective verdicts upon his own general intellectual trajectory also fall within this approach, as we have seen.



### 3) Articulating theory and political practice

Having reconnected the relations between theory and its external environment in defiance of Althusser, Hall argues that the proper object of theoretical enquiry is 'the concrete analysis of concrete situations', the nature of a given conjuncture (with its particular forms of articulation and complex unity). Althusser and Gramsci both emphasised that this was the main arena for an effective Marxist political practice to master, and Hall clearly endorses this theme. There is again however, a non-identical relationship between the two realms – theory is not a secondary servant of political practice. Instead, Hall regards it as involving a practice of 'organic intellectual' activity, the dual critical appraisal of elite theoretical discourses and a popular dissemination of critical knowledges that is not subordinate to 'more fundamental' tasks of everyday political intervention (Hall 1980A).

## Notes

1. This is a clear reference to the famous technique of ‘symptomatic reading’ Althusser performed upon Marx’s works to disinter the scientific problematic hidden in his late works, and distinguish these sharply from the ideological humanist framework of his early texts (see Althusser 1969 p32-39,66-69,169-172).

However despite the close parallels with Hall’s own procedure here, he objects to the technique of symptomatic reading. Whilst correctly seeking an alternative to teleological humanist interpretations and their reliance on the literal word of the text, Althusser’s approach tended to produce a Structuralist version of Marx through raising Marx’s ‘practical concepts’ to a more theoretical level with the aid of Structuralist instruments (Hall 1977B p18).

Hall claims to offer a third way, registering the uneven theoretical development and recurrence of previous concerns in Marx’s works, a modified use of the notion of ‘problematic’ that refuses to reduce any text to one governing framework brought to light through ‘symptomatic reading’ (Hall 1977B p17-19; Hall 1980A p25-26,281).

Quite whether this alternative is sufficient to secure Hall from analogous critiques that he too has produced a Structuralist Marx, an Althusserian in advance, is doubtful, even if he dissents (quite rightly) from key themes of Althusser’s reading. We are still ‘discovering’ Althusserian themes and parallels (double determination, relative autonomy of the political) in Marx’s texts. A similar outcome is evident in the reliance on Poulantzas’ work on class formation to read Marx’s later analyses of French politics (Hall 1977B).

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **THE FOUNDING OF CULTURAL STUDIES**

Stuart Hall was Director of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in Birmingham from 1968 until his departure in 1979. During these years he played the leading role in theoretically establishing Cultural Studies as a new and distinctive critical approach to cultural analysis, one founded upon the general approach of his ‘complex Marxism’ already described. This act of foundation is the topic under consideration in this chapter.

Hall was aiming to analyse the cultural sphere as a relatively autonomous level of the social formation, possessing its own distinct processes and relations whilst also being interrelated with other levels, in historically specific forms of combination, or articulations. This was a position opposing the hitherto dominant models of reductionism (reading the cultural as a secondary ‘superstructure’, determined by more fundamental economic relations) and idealism (treating culture as a constitutive force, but ignoring its relations with other social forms), introducing a third option within the field. In turn, it required the elaboration of a distinctive set of concepts to map its particular contours and forces, and chart their impact upon the rest of the social formation. From the basis of his theoretical bedrock for a ‘complex Marxism’ (the methodological guidelines extracted from Marx’s 1857 Introduction allied to Althusser’s reading of the social formation as a complex, overdetermined whole) Hall then calls up a wide range of themes and concepts developed by the likes of Levi-Strauss, Barthes, Poulantzas and Gramsci to chart the particular

dimensions of given cultural forms and practices – especially those of the mass media and the array of post-war youth subcultures.

In reviewing the development of cultural studies at CCCS up to 1979, Hall stressed both the internal and external determinants of this new approach, as we would expect in terms of his general commitment to the articulation of theoretical development with the realms of history and political practice. These are also, of course, the same determinants responsible for the appearance of the wider theoretical concern to renew Marxism Hall is undertaking in the same years. It was the dual impulse of the series of social explosions and reactionary responses associated with the ‘politics of 1968’ and the appearance in Britain of new theoretical approaches (Western Marxism, Structuralism) that underpinned the foundation of cultural studies as a distinctive discipline (Hall 1980A p25-29). These tendencies put onto the historical agenda new forms of cultural and political protest that an emerging anti-reductionist problematic could begin to theorise: “an open Marxism – rather than the application of a ready-made schema” (Hall 1980A p29).

Such a ‘problematic’ delivered significant theoretical advances over existing approaches. The impact of Structuralism decisively rejected humanist treatments of culture as an authentic expression of social experience, created by human agency in direct relationship with other levels of the social formation. Instead, it offered an approach stressing culture’s unconscious formulation as a structure regulating human subjectivity, and one exhibiting complex, non-identical relations with classes and other social levels (Hall 1980A p28-31; Hall 1980B p58,63-64,66-69). Within the ranks of Western Marxism, new conceptions of the complexity and openness of the cultural and ideological terrains upheld by the likes of

Gramsci and Poulantzas, signalled a clear break with simplistic Marxist theories of ideology. This pointed beyond predominant Left treatments of ideology as false consciousness, monolithic juggernaut securing permanent social reproduction, or direct expression of class experience. The focus now fell upon the complex and contested nature of these arenas, with dominant and subordinate forces struggling for hegemonic leadership in various institutions and through an array of strategies and tactics (Hall 1980A p33-36; Hall 1976A p38-40).

The series of articles Hall himself contributed to the establishment of the analytic he described as ‘the relative autonomy of culture’ during the 1970s are by now well documented, as the proliferation of introductory textbooks to cultural and media studies in recent years attest (see for example McGuigan 1992, Harris 1992, Dworkin 1997). Rather than repeat their summaries, my concern here is to illustrate the extent to which these works embody the general contours of the analysis of social phenomena as ‘complex wholes’ Hall laid down in his guidelines for a ‘complex Marxism’.

Some commentators have questioned the internal theoretical coherence of Hall’s Cultural Studies (for example Sparks 1996, Dworkin 1997, Rojek 2003). Furthermore, from the self-conception of his works that Hall now subscribes to, any attempt to show how they illustrate a common and underlying theoretical framework at the expense of stressing their mobile deployment of different theoretical sources to analyse a variety of cultural objects and practices would seem inappropriate. To ascribe to them a deep foundational framework misses the ‘openness’ of the discipline and Hall’s work as an on-going articulation of theory and history. Despite these potential criticisms, I will here aim to detail the deep

lying theoretical coherence and unity of Hall's CCCS cultural studies, showing their common concern with the constitutive role played by culture within the larger social formation, the complexity of its internal processes and external relationships, and their historically specific forms of articulation - in Hall's words, the complex unity of culture and its social environment. Having done so, I will return to this issue of theoretical coherence in my conclusion. A critical review of these works follows in Chapter 9.

## **1**

### **On the Internal Articulation of the Cultural**

Hall's illustration of the specificity of the cultural realm, highlighting its distinct processes, relations, institutions and social forces, and their complex constitution, covers four areas of investigation.

1. The processes of signification and classification were described by Hall as the distinctive product of cultural practices and institutions, and understood to be the result of 'ideological labour' rather than a natural given or simple reflection of reality. He invokes here the core theme of Structuralism, the role of language and culture in 'making the world mean':-

"Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language, and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse. Discursive 'knowledge' is the product not of the transparent representation of the 'real' in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions. Thus there is no intelligible discourse without the operation of a code" (Hall 1980C p131-134).

This whole process was based on the arbitrary nature of the relationship existing between the linguistic sign and its referent (see Culler 1988 p18-52 on this general point). The meaning of any given sign is provided through the place it occupies within the internal relations of larger linguistic or symbolic structures or codes, it is a relational entity and one that is socially produced, a convention (Hall 1980C p132). In the signification of social reality these underlying codes (or ‘deep structures’) are repeatedly drawn upon and mobilised by cultural agents as providers of meanings and contexts for events and phenomena. This is however primarily an unconscious practice, irreducible to the intentions of the cultural actors themselves, and one that tends to ‘spontaneously’ reproduce these fundamental cultural codes. It is through such a process that the ‘deep structures of meaning’ found in a society, and their incarnation of dominant ideological values and consensual norms, can be socially transmitted and secured (Hall 1971A p18,28-29,33-36; Hall 1973B p241-242; Hall 1980C p131-134).

Hall illustrated this approach in a series of media analyses that examined the portrayal of the dynamic of political polarisation and social conflict emerging in the wake of 1968 in British society. These events were mapped onto dominant cultural codes by media producers, whose apparently ‘factual’ reports actually depended upon the additional or contextual meanings supplied by “the deep semantic structures of a culture” to interpret them and assign an ‘explanatory’ context (Hall 1973A p12). There are both denotative (primary) and connotative (secondary) levels of signification involved here, a distinction made by Barthes that Hall relied on extensively (see Hall 1973A p11-14; 1973B p226; 1973C p48).

As an example, when considering the media portrayal of the 1971 Industrial Relations Bill and its attempt to limit strike action, Hall highlighted their structuring of public debate around an interpretation of the Bill that accepted the dominant values of the ‘national interest’ and the need to curb strikes. These secondary significations thus illustrated the reliance of the media upon connotative codes that exclude alternative assumptions about the class structuring of the Bill, ones that then function to trap future contributors to the debate within its political framework of moderation, legality and institutionalised conflict resolution (Hall 1973C p17-29). We can see here the profound linkages that exist between processes of signification, dominant cultural codes and the external fields of the social and political order (Hall 1973A p12-14). (For related analyses see Hall 1971A and 1973B).

However, despite this affinity, the processes of signification were not thereby closed or eternally fixed. The linguistic or cultural sign is an indeterminate entity with only an arbitrary relationship to its referent. As such there is always the possibility of challenging the prevailing signification of events and developing new ones from within alternative cultural frameworks. This polysemic quality is delimited by the presence of a ‘structure in dominance’ within the cultural order that restricts the scope for such ideological challenges and transformations, although they are never fully extinguished (Hall 1973A p13-14). Two examples of this resignification are cited by Hall – firstly the elaboration of oppositional readings by certain media audiences and, secondly, the practices of restylisation undertaken by youth subcultures upon cultural elements originally fixed in meaning by the dominant culture (see Hall 1973C p9-12 and Hall 1976A p53-56 respectively). What this points to politically is the openness of the cultural terrain as a valid site of, and stake in, class



struggle. This theoretical opening for a 'cultural politics' was one that grew substantially in Hall's later cultural analyses, a shift we will consider critically later on. The underlying model of language is also in need of scrutiny. It certainly provides an alternative to economic reductionism for cultural studies, but is there a sense in which it contains its own form of reduction, namely towards the ideal?

2. The nature of cultural institutions as complex wholes was illustrated in Hall's depiction of the mass media as a complex circuit of distinct 'relatively autonomous' moments articulated as a 'structure in dominance'. In place of existing views of the media as a simple, homogeneous vehicle transmitting a single all-powerful message in accordance with dominant economic and/or political interests ('Mass Culture' and 'Dominant Ideology' approaches) Hall sets out to grasp the distinctiveness of each of its constitutive moments and their interconnectedness in a complex unity (Hall 1980C p128). (1)

There were two key moments to consider. The ideological encoding of the media text by their producers (in accordance with the 'deep structure' of social norms connotatively drawn upon to fix the meaning of reported events) acted as the determining level overall, sharply delimiting the terrain of social interpretation through their possession of the cultural power to define such events, as noted above (Hall 1973C p9-12; Hall 1973A p1-4). The decoding of the text was not however fixed by its social production. Instead a range of 'relatively autonomous' decodings exist amongst socially and culturally differentiated audiences, variant articulations of the two 'non-identical' moments (Hall 1980C p135-136; Hall 1973C p3,9-12). Four possible decoding positions are outlined by Hall (dominant,

professional, negotiated, and oppositional) with the preponderance of the first and third related to the greater cultural weight held by the dominant cultural codes the media encode in the text. The rejection of readings made on the basis of the dominant cultural codes tends to be, for the most part, a partial one, modifying its global view on an issue to account for local, corporate variations (i.e. 'negotiated') rather than a fully-fledged globally alternative 'opposition' (Hall 1973A p16-18; 1980C p136-138; 1977B p344-345). We may note here in passing that there is no empirical confirmation of this decoding map offered by Hall, an absence we will find in relation to many of his concrete analyses.

3. Within the wider field of cultural relations Hall argued that there exist complex and changing relationships of domination and subordination, contested by rival forces through a variety of strategies in their struggles over hegemonic power and leadership. This Gramscian perspective recognises both the plurality of cultures within class divided societies and their structuring in unequal relations of power, wherein a dominant culture is pre-eminent in classifying social reality seeking to contain all other, subordinate ones. This is not a total form of incorporation, for there always exists the possibility of subordinate cultures struggling to resist this hegemonic power in various ways, from negotiation to outright opposition (Hall 1976A p11-13,38-40).

Hall examined the post-war configurations of working and middle-class cultures in Britain in these terms. The former was characterised by its corporate position, a distinctive structure possessing its own network of institutions and practices through which it wins 'space' from the overarching dominant culture that globally contains it. A range of

strategies exist within working class culture to deal with its subordinate status, reflecting both its own traditions of communality and the presence of dominant cultural values. The ‘sub-cultural revolts’ of post-war Britain were one such manifestation, ‘magical solutions’ adopted by working class youths to a changing social environment that drew upon and reworked elements from both their parental-class and dominant cultural traditions, without thereby fundamentally challenging the overarching balance of cultural forces (Hall 1976A p41-47).

Within middle class culture a more profound rupture emerged, with the appearance of a ‘counterculture’ amongst its youth, who mounted a ‘total critique’ of traditional dominant culture from within those institutions charged with the reproduction of cultural relations (media, education, family). This was a politically significant moment according to Hall, fracturing the established modes of reproduction and prefiguring new social forms and values. Crucially it allowed space for the appearance of other, radical political challenges and dynamics that ultimately led to the onset of a general crisis of hegemony (op cit p57-71).

Faced with these cultural challenges and their new forms of protest, the dominant culture moved to delegitimise both modes of revolt through a series of sponsored moral panics targeting ‘youth’ as the agent of social disorder and breakdown, in an attempt to restore hegemonic leadership. This ‘social reaction’ encompassed legal – coercive and cultural – consensual dimensions in its efforts to stave off the impact of an escalating crisis that eventually became generalised and endemic by the late 1970s (op cit p71-74). As for the actual political challenges these youth subcultures embodied, we will have occasion to question Hall’s estimate in Chapter 8.

In depicting this struggle for cultural power, Hall underscored the complexity of particular cultural forms elaborated upon this contested terrain. Far from being direct expressions of any given social class, or the product of an imposed ruling class power, these forms are ‘doubly articulated’ within the fields of class relations and the competing discourses of the cultural terrain, containing elements drawn from “other” class locations in their historically-specific constitution. There are no pure, simple cultures existing in either relations of total incorporation or separate coexistence.

4. The notion of ideology was reworked by Hall in the light of this complex articulation of cultural relations. In place of simplistic approaches treating the ideological as a monolithic sphere imposing ruling class interests upon subordinate classes through the institutions of the superstructures, he drew upon the insights of Gramsci and Poulantzas to chart its complex and internally differentiated constitution. Hall suggests there exist a range of rival discursive forms active upon this terrain, one structured in dominance through its articulation with the wider social formation and thereby containing a dominant ideology, but also open to contestation and struggle by opposing forces across the range of superstructural institutions. Instead of operating with notions of the ideological terrain as a functionalist concert of parts, we must attend to it as a ‘complex whole’ of discourses, subjectivities and institutions, asymmetrically structured but also traversed by contradictions and historically-specific articulations, with under determined outcomes (Hall 1971A p26-36; Hall 1977C p327-336).

Hall here singled out the work of Poulantzas as a theoretical guide (see Poulantzas 1973 p195-210). For Poulantzas ideologies were only produced within the shifting fields of class

forces and struggles, not objectively given by economic class location, forming composite ensembles rather than pure class products. They were elaborated within the matrix of an institutional superstructure that has internal contradictions and is open to the effects of ideological class struggle.

The impact of a dominant ideology upon this terrain depends on the ability of ruling class forces to actively re-present class divisions through the ideological mechanisms of 'separation' and 'unification' as a cohesive nation of individuals within the realms of state and civil society, the production of consent (Hall 1977C p337-346). It is the very 'relative autonomy' of the ideological level from the rest of the capitalist social formation that allows it to play this vital political role in organising hegemonic leadership. The overall force of this shift is to dislodge reductionist treatments of ideology whilst retaining their links to external determinants of the cultural terrain. Hall's later works lose this delicate balancing act, as we will see.

## **2**

### **Culture and its External Environment**

The external articulation of the cultural realm with the wider social formation is considered by Hall at the levels of both institutional linkages and class-culture relationships.

1. The relationship between the mass media and the political level was explained by Hall in terms of their 'complex unity', an articulation of non-identical superstructural institutions each possessing its own relative autonomy. Although the mass media are no mere tool of

economic or political interests, being a distinct institutional complex with its own internal processes, forces and dynamics, their articulation with the wider social formation and its particular political system does exercise significant determinations over its functioning. But this occurs through the daily exercise of its own relatively autonomous procedures, and not in spite of them, according to Hall (Hall 1972A p1,4-8; Hall 1981B p90).

Within the mechanisms of parliamentary democracy lie two contradictory tendencies, one to represent competing social interests and one to channel these conflicts into the acceptable boundaries of parliamentary politics. This dual dynamic thereby limits the reach of popular participation whilst securing consent for the political system overall. Hall saw the media as centrally involved in this complex process, shaping and winning consent for overall hegemonic domination and reproducing the dominant ideology via the operation of their own autonomous daily routines through which they structure and define social reality. This is not akin to monolithic ideological domination, for divergent perspectives and ‘secondary contradictions’ are found here, within and between media practitioners and political elites. It is a process also prone to the impact of the wider field of political class struggle and the emergence of alternative perspectives. What results is a contradictory process of ideological reproduction within and between different superstructural bodies, rather than a functionalist relay (Hall 1972A p8; Hall 1981B p93,114-118).

A number of mediating operational principles are embodied in media news production that secure this contradictory reproduction of the dominant ideology. Those of balance, impartiality and objectivity serve to police the boundaries of legitimate political activity, denigrating all extra-parliamentary action and unconsciously reinforcing the ‘deep structure’ of established social norms and values regarding the nature of politics, power and

social order (Hall 1972A p8-11). Since this is done without favouring any one particular mainstream party, the media thereby appear 'independent' and worthy of public trust and support.

Their commitment to consensus both acts as a guide to the content of daily media output and illustrates a concern to shape this very cornerstone of liberal – democratic systems, through providing the public with its primary sources for opinion formation (Hall 1972A p12-13). In a non-identical relation then, the media and the political level function, each in their own distinct ways, to secure the hegemonic reproduction of the overall political order. (An extended analysis of their secondary disputes is contained in Hall's study of broadcaster and politician relations, 1981B p88-109. Their contemporary resonance is vividly displayed in the debacle of the 2003 Hutton report and the allegations of the BBC on government claims of Iraq's weapons capability).

2. The relations between class and culture were depicted by Hall as complex and historically specific articulations, far beyond simple one-dimensional views of a direct expression of social conditions or alien imposition by ruling forces. The structuring of the cultural realm into relations of domination and subordination results from its penetration by wider class relations and struggles. Each cultural form within this realm is subject to a double determination by these class relations and the shifting dialectic of cultural power. In his concrete analyses of post-war youth subcultures Hall traced their specific forms and historical appearance in terms of this 'double articulation' (Hall 1976A p10-15,35,52-53). In post-war Britain a series of uneven shifts in the organisation of capitalist production, impacting upon patterns of housing, family structure and leisure activities, had profoundly

destabilised existing class relations and their class cultures. Within the working class, this disruption to their social and cultural milieu coupled with emerging new ideologies of consumption and affluence, resulted in the appearance of novel cultural responses by its youth. There has been a series of sub-cultural revolts or ‘solutions’ aimed at negotiating the contradictory pulls of class communality and individualised consumption exercised respectively by parent class and the dominant consumer culture (Hall 1976A p30-37). For Hall, these youth sub-cultures are distinctive cultural formations, doubly articulated in class and cultural relations. They borrow cultural elements from both parental and dominant cultures to fashion an identity and deal with the common class situation upon the basis of their own unique generational experience of those institutions mediating dominant cultural elements in working class localities and communities. This was a particular and historically specific variant of the common corporate strategy employed by the class as a whole to win space from the dominant culture in its neighbourhood (Hall op cit p41-57). Hall stressed this was an active process, refashioning cultural elements originating elsewhere by a class fraction elaborating their own cultural response to changing social and class relations. It indicates the need to approach class – culture relations in an anti-reductionist manner, treating their historical articulation as the result of multiple determinations appearing in specific forms, and available only through an analysis focused upon the particularities of the concrete situation. We have here one of Hall’s most persuasive cultural studies, a genuinely promising alternative to reductionist and idealist options. The failure to build on this subsequently is disappointing.



## On Theory and Articulation

In the light of this exposition we can see the charges laid against these works by the likes of Colin Sparks and Dennis Dworkin to be unfounded. They both argue that a lack of theoretical coherence marks Hall's cultural studies, one borne of their unstable combination of Structuralist and Humanist themes which pull the analyses in different and contradictory directions (Sparks 1996 p85; Dworkin 1997 p148,168,171-172). His attempted articulation of divergent theoretical elements is therefore a failure.

However, as we have shown, there is a common and theoretically coherent framework employed by Hall here, one derived from his wider elaboration of a 'complex Marxism'. Upon the basis of the methodology extracted from Marx's 1857 Introduction and Althusser's model of the over-determined character of the social formation, he investigates the 'relative autonomy' of cultural relations, institutions and forms as 'complex wholes'. These objects contain internally differentiated and relatively autonomous constitutive moments or parts, configured in structures of domination and subordination, and found only in historically specific forms of combination. They are also articulated to wider social relations and structures, forming part of larger 'complex wholes'. What Hall then does within these basic parameters is selectively appropriate themes from a variety of theoretical sources to "operationalise" this core framework in relation to the different cultural objects

under investigation. It is the common failure of Hall's critics to situate his cultural studies within the wider theoretical project of developing a 'complex Marxism' that prevents them from locating the unifying basis of these texts. They have started from the wrong place, within the battle-lines drawn between the clashing paradigms of Structuralism and Culturalism in Cultural Studies, rather than Hall's more global concerns for the foundation of a new Marxism, applicable to cultural, political and broader social phenomena, especially the conjunctural analysis of social formations.

There are two further issues to address here. Firstly Hall's critics do register the existence of two significant theoretical problems in his works even whilst missing its over-arching logic. Dennis Dworkin's concerns are over the shifting role of human agency in these cultural studies – one over-simplistically seen as prominent in youth sub-cultural practice but structurally effaced by the power of the mass media (Dworkin 1997 p148). What is really fundamentally at issue here is the lack of any concept of human agency present in Hall's works after his endorsement of the Structuralist critique of Humanism (Hall 1980A p30).

Dworkin rehearses Hall's attempt to transcend the unsustainable polarities of the Althusser – E P Thompson debate, without confronting this core problem (Dworkin op cit p220; Hall 1981A). As we have seen, Hall's solution is to draw upon Gramsci and Poulantzas, in order to differentiate and relativise the process of the social constitution of subjectivity, depicting the existence of a contested terrain of historically specific ideologies and subjectivities open to political transformation. This move does not however secure any viable theoretical and political conception of the active subject, to supplant the determined 'bearers' of social

structures present in Althusser's original anti-humanist alternative that Hall accepts theoretically, at great political cost. I will consider this theoretical gap further in Chapter 7.

Colin Sparks's critique of Hall identifies a fundamental rift between the core concern of cultural studies for the external relations of culture with its wider social environment, and Hall's appropriation of Althusser. (I have already discussed the exaggerated degree of this dialogue in Sparks' account). Sparks suggests that despite its proclamations upon the relative autonomy of culture and the superstructures, the Althusserian approach repeatedly focused upon their internal configurations at the expense of any external, economic determination 'in the last instance' (Sparks 1997 p83). Hall's CCCS analyses then reflect this ambiguity, treating youth sub-cultures as both socially determined and autonomous ideologies characterised by stylistic 'resignification' whilst examining the production of media texts semiotically without addressing their social base. The eventual solution to this contradictory amalgam involved a turn to the work of Ernesto Laclau, which further deferred the ideology – social structure relationship, encouraging an idealist turn in both Hall's works of the 1980s and cultural studies in general (op cit p84-91).

Sparks here both captures a peculiar problem of Hall's complex Marxism whilst misreading the nature of his CCCS analyses. The position of 'relative autonomy' Hall described as the core concern for Cultural Studies at CCCS did not incarnate the idealist trajectory Sparks identifies. Hall's 1970s works do repeatedly aim to examine the external articulation of cultural forms and institutions – for example the analyses of youth sub-cultures and the media – political superstructures relationships already discussed. Having

said that, Sparks is correct in noting the idealist consequences, for cultural studies and Hall's own works, of the increasing reliance upon the work of Laclau and his vision of ideologies as (semi) autonomous discourses of indeterminate elements. We will see in his treatments of Thatcherism as a concrete political ideology exactly where this retreat from the 'problem of determination' leads Hall. This is the crucial theoretical allegiance that marks his works of the 1980s and their focus upon ideological struggle and transformation as an open, underdetermined realm of political possibility. (On the idealist turn in Cultural Studies see McGuigan 1992).

The second issue concerns the very notion of theory as articulation itself. Hall's critics base their charges of theoretical incoherence on the contradictory originating discourses (Structuralism versus Humanism) from which he draws particular themes and concepts – hence the unresolved polarities of 'agency versus determination' and 'materialism versus idealism' disfiguring the analyses. Yet for Hall the whole process of theoretical development and conceptual borrowing involves the very *transformation* of these theoretical elements themselves through their relocation (or rearticulation) within a new theoretical ensemble. He describes this practice as follows:-

“...theories are constantly borrowing, enriching and advancing themselves by taking over concepts, propositions, ideas which have been partially developed within other approaches” (Hall 1977D p39).

Furthermore, “the work of theoretical development often proceeds in just this crab-like fashion – by going back to, working on, absorbing, developing and transforming concepts, findings, ideas and evidence advanced within another, perhaps ultimately less satisfactory paradigm” (Hall 1977D p40).

In this approach then, the nature of the themes and concepts in question is a relational matter, their meaning established in terms of their place within the larger theoretical ensemble they exist within, and not by any essential content determined by their relationship to an external referent (Hall 1980A p26; Culler 1988 p128-131). We cannot therefore assess the worth of any theoretical ensemble by invoking contradictory points of origin for its constitutive elements, if the nature of the latter is understood as being altered through its rearticulation in a new ensemble, the error made by Sparks and Dworkin. Perhaps the success of a theoretical ensemble might be better assessed by considering the insights delivered in relation to the theoretical object under examination, rather than through interrogating it for 'internal contradictions', although Hall is never wholly explicit on this issue (see Hall 1980E and Hall 1978B). Certainly as regards Hall's treatment of class – culture relations in post-war Britain, their mediated forms of combination in terms of a 'double articulation' of social and symbolic determinants, is a persuasive analysis that is a definite advance upon humanist or economic approaches, whatever Sparks's doubts about its contradictory conceptual raw materials.

The question lying at the centre of this issue, the degree of malleability displayed by theoretical elements in their rearticulation in new ensembles, is one that I cannot provide a definitive answer to here (2). We can note however that this treatment of cultural elements as indeterminate, relational entities is one Hall later employed in his analysis of popular ideologies and their political appropriation by rival forces. The successes of Thatcherism were crucially bound up with its instinctive appreciation of the rearticulability of popular values, traditions and concerns in its bid for hegemonic power. Hall then claimed that the

future for the Left involved a similar focus on reappropriating erstwhile ‘anti-socialist’ themes of individualism, choice and nationalism to build popular support. I will return to consider some theoretical and political consequences of this perspective on cultural forms (both elite and popular) as articulations of indeterminate elements later in this investigation of Hall’s complex Marxism.

## Notes

1. Hall here explicitly invoked his earlier analysis of Marx's 1857 Introduction as the theoretical guide for this approach. The similarities can be seen to extend to a repetition of Marx's double critique of existing alternative perspectives on capitalist production as either a whole characterised either by 'immediate identities' (Hegel) or 'juxtaposed complementarities' (Political Economy). Hall considers the "Mass Culture/Dominant Ideology" and "Uses and Gratifications" models of the media as contemporary versions of these reductionist and pluralist frameworks (see Hall 1982A for an extended critique along these lines).

2. The recently published work of Chris Rojek also draws attention to problems in Hall's practice of theoretical borrowing. However he fails to follow his critique all the way through, stopping at the point already illustrated by Sparks and Dworkin in a discussion of the conceptual ambiguity and incoherence displayed by Hall's works (Rojek 2003 p7-20). As I have already said, we need to go further than this and begin to challenge the underlying Structuralist premise on the arbitrary relationship between sign and referent, which licences the whole idealist or 'discursive' approach Hall, Laclau and so many others rely on.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE TURN TO GRAMSCI AND THE BREAK WITH COMPLEX CLASS REDUCTIONISM**

Policing The Crisis is widely recognised to be the highpoint of Hall's work at CCCS. It is a collaborative project uniting many areas of investigation undertaken in the Centre (youth subcultures, media) with other contemporary academic concerns (Marxist theories of the State, radical criminology) to create a panoramic historical narrative charting the shifting nature of class power in post-war Britain. In terms of Hall's project to develop a revitalised 'complex Marxism', the work signals a dual theoretical advance beyond the conceptual apparatus covered in Chapter 2.

The Althusserian perspective on the over-determined character of the social formation and its relatively autonomous constitutive levels or moments provided Hall with a general framework from which to pursue his goal of the 'concrete analysis of concrete situations'. It did not however bequeath a substantial corpus of concepts and themes to permit Hall to grasp the shifting, historically specific combinations of social processes, forces and contradictions marking the object of his investigations. A decisive turn to Gramsci's perspective on the social formation as laid out in the Prison Notebooks, allowed Hall to move closer to this goal, one clearly illustrated in the historical narrative of Policing The Crisis.



Secondly, Hall now begins theoretically to tackle the issue of how to conceptualise non-class relations and their complex forms of articulation with class, in particular those of race and racism. This initiates a shift away from his previous ‘complex class’ treatment of the social (later recognised by Hall as another, more sophisticated form of reductionism) and towards its irreducible complexity and articulated multiplicity of social antagonisms. The political and theoretical consequences of this shift are also on display in the narrative of *Policing The Crisis*, and in a related text charting the historical development of racism in post-war Britain (*Racism and Reaction* Hall 1978D). Before recounting the contours of these concrete analyses, I will first detail the theoretical advances Hall claims to find in the works of Gramsci and in new approaches to the character of racially structured societies.

## **1**

### **Gramsci and conjunctural analysis**

The best known part of *Policing The Crisis* is the elaborate and in-depth periodisation of the post-war British social formation according to its variable modes of hegemony, wherein Hall charts a shift from consensus to a more coercive approach attempting to restore social order in the face of a generalised and escalating crisis of hegemony. The conceptual underpinnings for this narrative lie elsewhere, in a series of reflections upon Gramsci’s views on the social formation and its historically specific complexities, published around the same time.

Hall considers Gramsci's approach to offer greater theoretical depth and flexibility than Althusser's work. It is also one more rigorously tied to the goal of informing a Marxist political practice, seeking to master the specificities and complexities of the conjuncture through its 'concrete analysis' (Hall 1978A p45,56). In direct comparison, Gramsci's approach to the analysis of class relations, politics and of ideologies was far superior to the similarly anti-reductionist 'problematic' of Althusserianism. It successfully avoided the universalistic and functionalist vision of social reproduction inscribed in the latter's arguments on the role of the Ideological State Apparatuses and their domination of the entire social terrain. Gramsci instead signalled the complexity and the provisionality of social power, its variable constitution across many social sites (especially the realm of civil society), its embodiment in different modes of struggle (with great stress laid on the terrain of ideology) and the shifting relations of force and distinctive modes of consent and coercion employed by rival forces in their struggles for hegemonic power (Hall 1978A p60-69). The question of social power is a matter for conjunctural analysis, a shift in Hall's perspective that is of increasing salience from here on in. His abiding concern for historical specificity and alternatives to universalism in Marxism here finds a potentially ideal theoretical antecedent.

In the Prison Notebooks Gramsci develops a compelling alternative to the reductionist base-superstructure model of Marxism according to Hall. Identifying specific historical conjunctures and their prevailing balance of forces as the direct object of Marxist analysis and strategy, Gramsci highlights the constitutive role of political and ideological arenas in the production of class forces and relations, and their struggles.

Structurally, the intermediary sphere of civil society is the key site on which classes battle for power and hegemony, a zone preponderant over that of the state in the organisation and maintenance of popular consent. Both terrains must be politically mastered to effect social change, through different strategies, with the 'war of position' to attain leadership over civil society preceding the 'war of manoeuvre' aimed at state power.

From this perspective Gramsci therefore pays special attention to the mobilising role of ideologies as organisers of classes and class fractions in their struggles for power. The practices of the intellectuals who aim to construct popular support for fundamental classes across the complex and contested ideological terrain, and the vital significance of the historical formations of common sense that must be addressed to generate this support, become key areas of investigation and intervention (Hall op cit p47-52). This leads Hall, in turn, to focus especially on the arenas of cultural and ideological intervention in his readings of post-war British politics, beginning with *Policing The Crisis*.

Within this theoretical grid, the concept of hegemony holds centre-stage. In Hall's reading it combines an appreciation of the constitutive powers of the different levels of the social formation (and their forms of combination) alongside a focus upon the shifting relations of class forces. This "enlarged and complex idea" provides Gramsci with the key to unlock and master the complexities and specificities of a 'concrete situation' (Hall 1980A p35).

It denotes all of the following:-

1. The process of economic, political and cultural leadership over the whole social formation necessary to build a new regime of power, across the terrains of both state and civil society with their plurality of contradictions;

2. The provisional and contested nature of a new organisation of power, mastering the balance in the 'relations of force', where no guarantees of success are provided by 'the economic';

3. An appreciation of the complexity and historical specificity of advanced capitalism, wherein power depends on the conquest of the myriad institutions of civil society and the mobilisation of popular consent;

4. The designation of class alliances and complex historical blocs as the relevant political actors, rather than whole classes simply imposing their own narrow interests (Hall 1980A p35-36; Hall 1980F p331-332).

(On the inflated scope of this concept and the imprecision it encourages in Hall's concrete analyses, see Rojek 2003 p114-116). (2).

We must keep this enlarged conception firmly in mind when we go on to examine his actual applications of it in the concrete analyses of concrete situations undertaken in *Policing The Crisis* and *The Hard Road To Renewal*. In particular, we need to consider how fully the various parameters of hegemony are present in these works, or whether there is any imbalance in his coverage. I will have reason to return to this issue on numerous occasions in the critical appraisals of Hall's 'complex Marxism' that follow these expositions.

## **Race, Racism and the Social Formation**

Hall offers a lengthy discussion of the ‘complex articulation’ of race and class, the irreducibility of race to class and its role as a key social structure, in the concluding section of *Policing The Crisis*. His view is that “Race is the modality in which class is lived. It is also the medium in which class relations are experienced” within a series of distinctive social practices and institutions (Hall 1978C p394). Racism is also depicted as a specific mechanism reproducing black labour in social positions that are race-specific. Again, the theoretical foundations for this discussion lie elsewhere, in a set of contemporary texts which provide both a conceptual framework for grasping the constitutive role of race and racism in the social formation and a detailed narration of their historical development in post-war Britain.

In ‘Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance’ (Hall 1980F) Hall outlines a new perspective upon the role of race in the social formation through a double critique of existing approaches, in a manner analogous to his foundational arguments for the creation of a distinctive ‘problematic’ in Cultural Studies and his interpretation of Marx’s methodology. Neither reductionist views of race as an effect of economic relations, nor pluralist treatments of its constitutive role unrelated to other social structures were considered satisfactory. In their place, a new non-reductionist and historically-specific

approach could be elaborated from the insights contained in Marx's 1857 Introduction (Hall 1980F p305-308). This seeks to root political and ideological structures (and racist practices) in given material conditions of existence and the historically specific forms of their relations, or articulation, one whose configuration crucially depends upon the character of *other* constitutive determinants (Hall 1980F p322-329).

As an example of this alternative approach, Hall cites Wolpe's analysis of the racial structuring of class relations in South Africa, and its reliance on the Althusserian notion of the social formation as composed of an 'articulation of modes of production' (both capitalist and non-capitalist). The specific combination of different modes of production in South African society led to the development of distinctive political and ideological practices of racism according to Wolpe. These both racially structure the social order and assist the reproduction of capital, through providing cheap labour and effecting political control via racial division and segregation (Hall op cit p320-322). So, here the relations between race and class are 'combined and uneven' rather than standing in any simple correspondence powered by some universal 'logic' of capitalist development.

Hall goes on to stress that what needs to be examined in any study are the historically particular forms of race and racism and their articulation with the rest of the social formation. There is no *general* history of racism – it exists only in its historical specificity, explicable in terms of its relations with other social structures and their equally specific articulations (Hall op cit p338-339). Again then, we are directed to the vectors of historically-specific analysis, operating with a model of 'complex particularity'.

Equally familiar, Hall notes that such a view of the social formation as an articulated hierarchy of constitutive determinants requires additional concepts to grasp the effectivity

of the non-economic levels. He identifies the works of Gramsci and Laclau here as central guides. In particular they have opened up a perspective upon the constitutive role of ideology - its operations upon the vital terrain of common sense and open-ended nature, available for political transformation – that can highlight the powerful ideological dimensions of race and racism (Hall 1980F p336-342). Racist ideologies, says Hall, are divisive forces, fracturing classes through their dynamics of dehistoricisation, individualisation and reunification, and thereby producing racist subjects and social divisions. Race then becomes the modality in which these fractions live their relations to each other and the wider society, with damaging political consequences for the unifying political projects of the Left. (The ideological dynamics of racism in British society and the problems involved in challenging it, in particular within the realm of the mass media, are explored further in Hall 1981C).

This new paradigm is at work in Hall's synoptic overview of racism in post-war Britain, 'Racism and Reaction' (Hall 1978D). Written at the same time as *Policing The Crisis* this covers a similar terrain from the perspective of the development of an historically specific form emerging in relation to the overall trajectory of the social formation. This indigenous racism could only be explained through its elaboration in tandem with other social developments, especially the overarching shift from consensus to social crisis that is the major theme of *Policing The Crisis*.

Hall offers a four phase narration of this process, focusing in particular upon its ideological dynamics. After the period of initial settlement in the late 1940s (where dreams of

assimilation were underwritten by economic boom), racism first appeared in the Notting Hill riots of 1958, linking the struggle for scarce resources in a mixed urban area with contemporary concerns over youth and permissiveness in post war society (Hall 1978D p26-28). The onset of economic decline in the early 60s ushered in a second phase, centred upon opposition to black immigration and its electoral exploitation at Smethwick. This stoked white working class fears, introduced a racist populism into the heart of mainstream politics and was followed by restrictive immigration legislation (Hall op cit p28-29). With the collapse of consensus in the wake of '1968', race and racism emerged as a key site of social conflict. Assimilation gave way to black separatism and the birth of 'Powellism' as an official racist policy in British politics, within an escalating social crisis marked by multiplying social antagonisms. Race was now an ideological 'prism' through which increasing numbers of people understood and lived through this crisis, and the increasingly coercive responses to it by the state. Ideologically Powellism was dominant, mobilising popular fears and concerns, and connecting them to its discourse on the 'threat' of immigrants and 'swamping' (op cit p29-30).

In the final phase, the backlash of the 1970s witnessed further coercive and ideological mobilisation around the race issue within the broader drift into a 'law and order' society. Increasing use of the law and coercive state machinery to stabilise the social order was reflected in harsh policing of black colonies and racist sentencing, whilst black youth became further alienated and criminalised. At the ideological level, race became the 'signifier' of this entire social crisis as well as the means through which popular consent is generated for an authoritarian drive to restore 'order' (Hall op cit p30-32).



Hall concludes this analysis by identifying the pre-eminent form that this burgeoning ideology of indigenous racism has taken, the phenomenon of the ‘moral panic’. Here a visible social group is singled out and scapegoated, treated as the source of a range of social problems and then ideologically exploited to build popular support for strong state responses across the whole of society. Racism, grounded in natural and biological divisions, functions especially well here, enabling the mere presence of a visible social group to ‘stand for’ a complex range of social problems. It acts as an ideological ‘substitute’ for the complex array of political and economic determinants that actually generate poor housing, mass unemployment and street crime, thereby concealing these fundamental causes (Hall 1978D p34-35).

### **3**

## **On Policing The Crisis**

Many themes from the preceding analyses recur, writ large, in the much broader narration of post-war British historical development in *Policing The Crisis*. The trajectory from consent to social crisis and coercive counter-measures traced by Hall pays particular attention to the ideological dynamics involved in the construction of political projects and settlements, as a centrepiece of the struggles for hegemonic power and its variable modes of consensual and coercive rule. Flanking this narrative of shifting conjunctures in modern

Britain, Hall examines the sudden emergence of a ‘moral panic’ about a new crime of ‘mugging’ and its social construction within this historical collapse of consensus ; he also provides a distinctive structural analysis of the position of black labour and race relations that underpins its contemporary social and political practices. This composite and collaborative project thus unites existing CCCS analyses of the media as a signifying force and of youth subcultures and their social visibility, to an overarching vision of the course of contemporary history that frames these cultural practices. A Gramscian concern for the mobilising power of ideologies, and their historical development as organic forces within larger social dynamics of hegemonic contestation is central to Hall’s perspective here, a precursor to his later treatment of Thatcherism as an ‘authoritarian populism’. In place of the prevalent descriptions of *Policing The Crisis* as a massive, sprawling work, containing many different strands of analysis and investigation made by the likes of Chris Rojek and Martin Barker – a theme that then licenses too summary an exegesis and coverage of its content - my detailed exposition here follows the four part division of the book itself in outlining its major concerns.

Part One delineates the social construction of a moral panic around ‘mugging’ in opposition to the official and dominant view of it as a frightening and escalating new crime, related to a general rising crime rate and soft treatment of criminals. The agencies of the ‘control culture’ were all actively involved in the production of this crime wave, rather than being mere passive and worried bystanders; and they then used the existence of such a phenomenon to argue for further and tougher measures to combat it. Hall draws on his previous CCCS analyses to highlight the media’s contribution, noting their excessive

reliance upon the police and the courts for crime news and their mapping of this new crime wave onto existing dominant interpretations of 'crime in society', thereby reproducing the views of the dominant ideology. Their campaigning role in referring such events to 'public concerns' and thus orchestrating public opinion in favour of tough responses was highly effective in ensuring a 'closure' on the issue, producing a new consensus. As for the police, Hall argues that their operational practices can produce their own crime waves, through targeting resources on particular areas/activities, and thereby come to influence wider public perceptions on crime (Hall 1978C p3-18,38-52,57-66,70-76).

In Part Two Hall illustrates this general dynamic through a case study of a mugging in Birmingham. He focuses on the media's structuring role for the interpretation of this event, their relating of it to dominant ideologies of crime and its discourse of evil, the law as protector, etc, at the expense of examining any political determinants of the immediate environment (Hall 1978C p89-138). He then broadens out the focus to delineate the wider field of the 'English ideologies of crime' and its dominance by the traditional-conservative paradigm (centred on the themes of respectability, discipline, the law) which has created a cross-class consensus through its mobilisation of subordinate class fears of street crime. This paradigm was extensively articulated in post-war decades to generate a groundswell of popular opinion against rising crime. Such ideological manoeuvring must however be seen in relation to wider social changes that weakened social stability, ideologically projecting a sense of dislocation and anxiety onto a series of scapegoats and moral panics, of which mugging is only the latest. Hall concludes that 'crime waves' need to be understood in

relation to this wider social context and especially their political processes of class power and hegemony implemented at the level of the state (Hall 1978C p139-177).

Part Three is the longest and most elaborate part of the book and sets out to examine these relationships between crime, law and state through Hall's interpretation of Gramsci's perspective of hegemony and class power. He begins with a structural analysis of the position and role of the state and the law in relation to class power and the construction of hegemony in advanced capitalist societies. These institutions have a 'relatively autonomous' role in securing the universalisation of a ruling class's power at the political and ideological levels. They provide formal equality for all citizens in relation to processes of political representation and legal jurisdiction, hence appearing ideologically impartial. At the same time however, they also protect and enhance capitalist interests, allowing the state to conform the entire social formation to the particular contours of capitalist power from 'above' the realm of class antagonisms (Hall 1978C p190-208). Their relative autonomy is crucial for the construction of hegemony and popular consent, which is the dominant modality of class rule in modern liberal democracies.

This structural settlement has been unhinged however by post-war developments in Britain. The interventionist welfare state emerging since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century became deeply entwined with its social base through its increasing role in economic, educational and housing provision. This shift both enhanced and contained working class interests, diluting the exercise of capitalist power whilst creating the legitimating basis for popular consent. However as it has tried to manage ever more spheres of social life, including the economy

and the realm of political class struggle (to gain popular consent), this state form was led further into a series of conflicts that ultimately resulted in the historical collapse of consensus and a general crisis of hegemony.

In response to this, a strong shift towards the use of coercive power by the state and the loss of neutrality on the part of the law took place, in an attempt to re-impose class power – and thereby their relative autonomy and consensual functions have been lost. New social and political forces now appeared to impose a more authoritarian regime (Hall op cit p208-217).

Hall then builds upon this general vision of the structural shifts in state – society relations in an elaborate conjunctural treatment of the trajectory of post-war Britain and its shifting modes of hegemony. He traces an arc from the establishment of consensus in the 1950s through its disintegration in the 60s and the ultimate recourse to an ‘exceptional form of class domination’ imposed through an increasingly authoritarian state in the next decade. This history is based upon the Althusserian vision of conjunctures as composed of multiple social contradictions, irreducible to any pure Capital-Labour confrontation, wherein different forces, struggles and dynamics, each with their own distinct histories, eventually combine to create a profound social crisis. In this complex situation, the ideological dimensions of class power and struggle are treated as centrally important by Hall, the terrain of popular consent and its mobilisation through the particular mechanism of the moral panic being pre-eminent. The panic about mugging with which he began is then theoretically re-located within this larger narrative (Hall 1978C p218-222).

The consensus established under Tory rule in the 1950s was based on the foundations of the mixed economy, the welfare state and the ideology of consumerism. Its initial fracturing in the face of marginal social movements (CND, the youth subcultures) and a wider sense of unease about 'materialism' destroying traditional British ways of life, led to an alternative social-democratic variant launched by Labour in the mid 60s. This was equally short-lived however, generating working class resistance to its strategies of corporatist containment. By the end of the decade, the slide from 'managed dissensus' to an escalating social and political polarisation was well underway. In the aftermath of '68' the challenge posed by the 'counterculture' in the realms of morality and civil society was taken to be an explicit threat to the state, provoking a strong reaction on the part of the state, the media and a growing band of political – moral campaigners. Building upon earlier campaigns against liberalism, permissiveness and race/immigration, a decisive turn to social reaction and authoritarianism occurred in the ideological sphere, tapping the fears and changes present in petty-bourgeois and working class communities and exploiting these politically. A sense of general social crisis was propagated, mapping the distinct issues of race, violence, permissiveness, student and industrial militancy into a common threat and malaise. At this stage in the erosion of post-war hegemony, the challenges were centred upon social contradictions and forms of political protest outside the traditional spheres of the economy and class struggle (Hall 1978C p227-260).

By the early 1970s a general crisis of hegemony was gripping the nation, all the different social contradictions and forces intersecting and now being joined by a resurgent working class industrial militancy. The response of the state to this 'exhaustion of consent' was to

move sharply towards the pole of coercive repression and directly impose class interest through a new 'law and order' agenda. A shift in the locus of struggle from civil society and the superstructural institutions to the terrain of the state and capital – labour relations now began. Heath's election victory, fuelled by a populist crusade in the media, represented this new solution, a turn towards the law and market forces as disciplining mechanisms to restore social order and regain control over civil society. Despite this shift and its groundswell of popular support ideologically orchestrated by the media, the new strategy was blown fundamentally off course by an escalation of working class struggle in response to the introduction of the law into industrial relations, exemplified by the success of the miners. Once again, an ideological escalation followed, the forces of social reaction raising the ideological stakes to the threshold of an impending drastic threat of anarchy and violence facing British society. It is at this moment in the historical trajectory of post-war Britain that the mugging panic emerged, into a feverish ideological climate and deepening social crisis wherein conservative forces are attempting to restore order through the construction of an 'exceptional form of the state' backed by a populist authoritarian campaign. And it is only by reconstructing this broader historical context that the disproportionate official social reaction to mugging already examined can be explained (Hall 1978C p260-306).

The rest of the 1970s witnessed an increasingly crisis-ridden society attempt to deal with the political defeats of Heath's government and Labour's latest social- democratic alternative at the hands of the working class, in a sharply deteriorating economic climate that signalled the demise of Keynesian strategies previously relied on by both mainstream

parties. A profound stalemate between fundamental social forces was reached, with increasing efforts upon the ideological terrain to resolve this crisis through a second attempt at restoring social order and market forces in opposition to social-democratic egalitarianism, the welfare state and the permissive society. Here a new political force emerged, building on earlier efforts to create an authoritarian populist base for such a programme, harnessing public anxieties for its project through their ideological mobilisation via a series of sponsored moral panics. This was the moment of Thatcherism as a rising political and popular force, determined to extend the scope of the exceptional state already in place and undertake far-reaching measures to resolve the crisis of hegemony (Hall 1978C p306-323). (3)

In Part Four Hall switches tack and begins considering mugging 'from below', in terms of its social content and politics, within the larger issues of contemporary black struggles and the complex relationships existing between race and class. The social content of mugging is related to the set of structures that constitute black youth as a distinct class fraction of black labour in a position of 'secondariness' within the whole working class. From such a disadvantaged position, in deteriorating social conditions, crime is an all too likely response. Furthermore, race is not only a structure reproducing the black worker as a sub-proletariat, but also a culture through which consciousness, struggles and resistance are formed. Black crime can become a particular mode of survival in relation to the structural condition of secondariness, with links to certain cultural traditions of 'hustling', a mode of resistance or component part of the 'repertoire of solutions' developed by blacks in response to their structurally determined position. It is not however a classically political



act, more a displaced expression of the experience of permanent exclusion (Hall 1978C p339-362,389-391).

As regards the relationships involved in the constitution of black labour and its social and political struggles (including its criminal activities), none of the then current interpretations grasped the profound discontinuities existing between the levels of the social formation here says Hall. Black crime could not be reduced to a simple 'revolt of the wageless' (where a political refusal to work leads directly to crime), a consequence of a lumpenproletarian or 'reserve army of labour' structural position (economic necessity generating crime), or read in terms of Fanon's 'wretched of the earth'.

Instead, he argued we need to develop an account of black labour and its forms of political struggle in terms of their complex articulation of race and class as constitutive processes. Race and racism profoundly enter into the formation of black labour at each level of the social formation (as economic agents, political forces and the collective subject of ideology), and in distinctive ways in every level, preventing a simple translation from one to the other of these 'relatively autonomous' levels. In sum - "Race is the modality in which class is lived" (Hall op cit p394). This over-determined articulation of ethnic and class relations creates profound political problems for the racial segmentation of the working class. Capital has repeatedly been able to reproduce the class in its divided form and prevent political unification through the modality of race, confining it to sectional struggles. The possibility of class unification is further inhibited by the practices of black crime which ideologically reinforce the black/white division, transforming the deprivation of the whole class (the breeding ground for crime) into an issue of race and the folk devil of

the ‘black mugger’. Hall concluded that as yet no political strategy existed to transform the criminal responses of the black wageless into a politically unified consciousness and class struggle, nor to effect a class wide unification of black and white (Hall 1978C p362-388,391-397). The resolution of the crisis, Hall implied, would come from above rather than through a unified social force emerging out of divided subordinate classes. We will consider this estimation of the political potential of subordinate classes further in Chapter 10.

## **4**

### **Theoretical shifts and social contexts**

We have traced a significant theoretical development in the elaboration of Hall’s complex Marxism. However, thus far, this has been a purely ‘internal history’ of intellectual advance without any consideration of the external determinants powering this shift. As we have seen this ‘double articulation’ of theory with the wider dynamics of social and historical development is a central theme of Hall’s position, one already noted as underpinning the birth of Cultural Studies and Hall’s own reinterpretation of Marxism. In relation to his dual turn to Gramsci and the analysis of non-class social relations as constitutive processes in society, Hall has pinpointed their external stimuli in two other texts than those we have discussed here.

For Gramsci, Hall notes the impetus that the rise of Thatcherism and the New Right gave to a more historically-specific and conjuncturalist approach than that offered by the previously dominant influence of Althusser:

“More important, the climate of the times has proved increasingly inhospitable to the abstract, theoreticist tenor of his writing. In the face of Thatcherism, monetarism and the ascendancy of the right, many have turned to more concrete, historically informed kinds of writing” (Hall 1981A p379).

As we have seen above it is precisely these concerns for historical specificity and the nature of the conjuncture that Gramsci provided, enabling Hall to chart the particular contours of hegemonic rule in post-war Britain and the emergence of an indigenous racism. He notes this explicitly elsewhere:

“In this respect Gramsci massively corrects the ahistorical, highly abstract, formal and theoreticist level at which Structuralist theories tend to operate. His thinking is always historically specific and ‘conjunctural’”(Hall 1980A p36).

The validity of Hall’s appropriation of Gramsci is a line of enquiry we will pursue in the second half of this study.

As for the role of non-class relations their theoretical recognition was a reflection of the rise of increasingly visible social movements centred on feminist and anti-racist goals, and their challenge to the historical prioritisation of class within Marxism, complex or otherwise. Hall’s retrospective narration of the development of CCCS up to his departure in 1979 registered the fatal impact of feminist writing at the Centre upon its hitherto dominant ‘complex class reductionism’

“...the attention to the structuring principle of gender and to questions of sexual difference and patriarchal relations has rendered it impossible to fall back behind the intrinsic heterogeneity and necessary complexity of different kinds of contradiction, attributable in neither a ‘first’ or ‘last’ sense to the ‘economic’” (Hall 1980A p38).

Similarly, as we have seen, the attempt to conceptualise the position of black labour in post-war Britain refused any reduction of race to class, addressing their ‘complex articulation’. Both implied a shift towards a new view of the social formation as composed of multiple social antagonisms and contradictions. Politically, this precipitated a range of oppressed groups existing as potential constituent forces for any socialist project, as Hall went on to stress in his works of the 1980s which are written in opposition to any reduction of these specific, conjunctural forces and struggles to an essential class contradiction:

“...socialism has to be constructed by a real political practice...the hard road towards the building up...of different sites of struggle into a broad, popular and democratic movement in the direction of a non-statist socialism” (Hall 1981A p384-385).

What Hall later described as decisive, externally-derived ‘interruptions’ to the agenda of Cultural Studies therefore had a profound impact upon his own project of developing a ‘complex Marxism’ (Hall 1996B p268-270) (4). Furthermore Hall already had in place, through his ‘turn to Gramsci’, a theoretical guide on how to incorporate this range of oppositional forces strategically. They were to be unified through the political construction of a counter-hegemonic historic bloc, the creation of a national-popular will, after the manner of Gramsci’s recommendations for an alliance of proletariat and peasantry in 1920s Italy. This perspective dominates Hall’s work of the next decade charting the appropriate strategic response for the Left in the face of Thatcherism.

Before we turn to these texts however, we must first recount his further discussions on the nature of ideology, whose impetus comes from the works of Ernesto Laclau. The model Hall derives from this 'critical dialogue' is central to his understanding of how Thatcherism has been politically successful and to how the Left can strategically respond, in particular via the contestation of the realm of 'the popular' and its conception of 'the people', in opposition to 'the power bloc' (Hall 1981D p238-239). From now on then, these themes of conjunctural analysis and the plurality of the social become ever-more preponderant in his works.

## Notes

1. On the weaknesses of Althusserianism as a mode of conjunctural analysis, see Benton 1984 p79; Anderson 1980 p77; Wood 1996 p55,59.
2. There is a second, more in-depth appropriation of Gramsci effected by Hall in his confrontation with the political successes of Thatcherism that I will cover in the next chapter. Here there are additional emphases placed upon the fundamentally contingent nature of social processes, and the plurality of social forces characterising the conjuncture which must be politically and ideologically built into a historic bloc to sustain a genuinely hegemonic alternative. Quite how accurate these emphases are, vis-à-vis Gramsci's own concerns, remains to be seen.
3. Although Hall has concentrated here upon the conjunctural and political – ideological dimensions in this history of post-war Britain, he also referred at times to deeper structural and economic processes and determinants. These included the structural failure to complete the transition to late capitalism in British society that affects all areas of social life; the structural realignment of the state in late capitalism (and its increasing intervention in spheres of economic management and class struggle) which was taken as the underlying determinant of the 'crisis of the state'; and the rise of the counterculture understood in terms of a cultural break aligned to the needs of a changing capitalist economy. How well these subordinate stresses are 'aligned' with the dominant conjunctural and superstructuralist narrative Hall relates is another matter. Many critics have charged this work with theoretical incoherence (Colin Sparks, David Harris, Martin Barker and now Chris Rojek). There are however, far more fundamental lines of enquiry and critique to follow in assessing its merits, which I will relate subsequently.
4. Hall consistently refers to this trio of 'class, race and gender' in his works of the 1980s, but there is next to nothing written about gender per se.

## CHAPTER 5

### IDEOLOGY AND THE CHALLENGE OF THATCHERISM

Hall's works of the 1980s are written for the most part under the banner of developing a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. He is here aiming to fashion a version of Marxism that can theoretically account for and practically master the specificities of a distinctive conjuncture. This was one characterised by the dual challenge it posed to the Left, resulting from the rise of a drastically right-wing government enjoying substantial popular support and the proliferation of new progressive movements, needing to be incorporated into its political strategy. It is in the work of Ernesto Laclau that Hall finds theoretical inspiration for these concerns. Laclau's new approach to the nature of ideologies, his concrete analysis of populism as an organic ideology, and the later call for a new Left political strategy based on discursive cultural practice in increasingly complex, plural social orders, become central to Hall's response to the rise of Thatcherism. It also leads him to a second, much deeper encounter with Gramsci and his 'prefiguration' of many of Laclau's (and Hall's) themes. If the site par excellence of this new approach is Hall's celebrated analysis of Thatcherism as 'authoritarian populism', we must first retrace the theoretical advances made by Laclau and adopted by Hall in his on-going investigations on the nature of ideology and culture as social processes. In later chapters I will have much more to say on the persuasiveness and coherence of Laclau's perspectives, and their compatibility with Hall's efforts to renew Marxism through their deployment. Here I will restrict myself to an exposition of these themes (1).

## **Ideology and culture as a ‘double articulation’**

Hall's mature analyses of ideologies, cultural forms and subjectivities, and their formation as doubly articulated entities, build on foundations laid down in his CCCS works. Having demonstrated their relative autonomy and constitutive role in social life, he now incorporates Laclau's insights on their historical provisionality and articulation as ensembles of class-neutral elements formed within an expanding range of social relations and antagonisms. This takes the anti-reductionist thrust of his earlier work further, breaking with its residual 'complex class reductionism' in favour of a perspective stressing the plurality of the social and its range of competing ideologies and subjectivities (including their destabilising and fragmentary impact upon the formation of the individual subject). The constitutive role of culture and ideology is now given much greater salience in the creation of political subjects and their identities and interests. This is in turn examined in relation to much broader processes of hegemonic contestation and the construction of unified social blocs carried out on the terrains of popular common sense and the institutional matrix of civil society, in the manner of Gramsci. Hall's previous focus on the dual determination of cultural forms undergoes a significant modification here. Though always formally present, in certain analyses there is no substantive role played by the external determinants. I will discuss this later, vis-à-vis his treatment of Thatcherism and its implications for the Left's strategic response.



## On the nature of Ideology

Laclau's treatment of ideology attempted to secure a non-reductionist position that freed both the constitution of ideologies and the whole social structure from any fixed determination by class. Initially his concern was to establish the existence of non-class relations and contradictions as constitutive forces within the social formation, in the shape of the 'people – power bloc' contradiction. This created a distinct and irreducible terrain of popular-democratic struggle and ideologies that fundamental classes must address politically. Ideologically it was necessary to intervene and link these popular-democratic interpellations and traditions to wider class discourses, producing a new version of 'the people' behind such projects, as a new collective subject. This possibility was given by the essential indeterminacy of the ideological element and its potential rearticulation in a new ensemble. For in fact, the basic unit of ideologies, the sign, was class neutral, rather than fixed within a given class tradition. It required an active struggle to articulate the political and ideological existence of a class, to build popular support, widen its objectives and aspire to hegemonic leadership – none of this was 'given' by the economic level. A range of popular traditions previously seen as 'bourgeois' by the Left (for example nationalism) now became available for socialist political intervention. In Laclau's words "there is no socialism without populism" (Laclau 1977 p196; see also p99-142,158-176,192-197).

In his later work with Chantal Mouffe, Laclau accorded an even greater constitutive power to the processes of ideology and discourse. In a society no longer possessing a single foundation within its many open spaces and multiple processes, there remained only

practices of 'hegemonic articulation' able to fix its particular configuration and political regime. Politics was now a realm of articulation, not reflection, one that creates not only a new social unity out of existing differences but, also, the very historical interests and identities these groups uphold. There are no longer any 'objective' interests that can underpin a political practice. Hence there is no centrality afforded to class in a hegemonic project seeking to forge a social bloc from the many different social antagonisms. This new 'post-Marxist' politics reflected the changing pattern of social relations in modern societies, an expanding dynamic of 'democratisation' undermining the unity of the social and of its subjects that has no pre-given direction. Its character, or form of articulation, depends on the nature of the political interventions launched to master hegemonically this new plurality and 'fix' it in a particular project (as seen in the case of Thatcherism). The Left must respond likewise, abandoning its old essentialist positions of fixed foundational social relations (class), institutional concentrations of political power (state) and established political forms (party). In the plural social, all social realms and relations are sites of intervention and politicisation, to be effected by the constitutive practices of political and discursive articulation (Laclau and Mouffe 1985 p1-4,85-87,95-96,111-121,131-142,149-193).

Hall draws upon these themes in his reworking of the Marxist legacy on ideology, offering a nuanced "discursive" materialism that begins from a re-reading of Marx's remarks on ideology in Capital. According to Hall there were advanced alternative theses contained here at odds with the well documented simplicities and shortcomings of the Classical Marxist position (2).

The problem of economic determinism was implicitly overthrown by Marx's recognition of the differential representation of the circuit of capitalist production in the distinct discourses of political economy and Marxism itself. This multi-vocal representation of social relations diametrically opposed any unilateral economic determinism. Similarly the constitutive role of ideology in the formation of social subjects was foreshadowed in Marx's description of the market as the source for spontaneous understandings of social life. And the distinction between different forms of political economy (classical versus vulgar) pointed the way forward from notions of a strict correspondence between class and ideology (Hall 1983A p62,66-75).

The works of Laclau allowed Hall to build on these beginnings and significantly reformulate a new materialist view of ideology within Marxism. Three major points are involved here.

- 1) Ideologies do not simply reflect the real, they actively represent it in a particular way, an articulation serving to orient practical action and political activity.
- 2) Ideologies produce subjects through the mechanisms of 'interpellation' at both individual and collective levels, but these identities are never eternally fixed, remaining open to future contestation and transformation. In the modern, plural social, these identities cross-cut each other in complex ways, fragmenting the individual subject, and creating a range of social forces available for political unification in ideological struggle. Furthermore the constitutive role of ideology extends to the specific interests of social groups. There are no 'objective interests' beyond political and ideological construction to found a political practice on, only historically accomplished articulations that are never guaranteed.

3) The relationship of class and ideology is not fixed. Ideologies are articulated ensembles of indeterminate elements, only provisionally linked to social forces and always open to contestation and transformation within the terrain of ideological struggle. Hegemonic leadership depends upon such a contestation of dominant ideologies and the rearticulation of resonant themes to win popular support for alternative positions. This mobility and mutability is not free from material constraints however. For the character of the historical terrain and its constituent forces lays down 'tendential alignments' or historically-secured correspondences, that limit the scope for ideological struggle and rearticulation. An example of this lies in the profoundly reactionary cast of nationalism in Britain due to its imperial history. In sum then, these ideologies are never secondary reflections of pre-existing classes but, instead, act as constitutive forces in their creation as political subjects, again in historically-provisional forms (Hall 1983A p77-82).

On the basis of such a perspective Hall links the analysis of ideology and subjectivity to his existing Gramscian framework of hegemony. He can now track the conjuncturally specific configurations of discourses and social forces struggling for mastery in the ideological sphere, aiming to secure or contest dominant articulations of conceptions, subjectivities and social forces. The political task this creates for the Left according to Hall is to abandon its economic reductionism and actively start to intervene in this arena. It has to develop an organic ideology that can unify a progressive historic bloc from the array of social forces, to build popular support for its alternative by contesting the terrain of common sense through strategies of disarticulation/rearticulation, and produce a new collective subject, a

new version of the people, behind its project. As Hall says, economic determinism is now only one of the 'first instance'. It establishes the contours of the concrete relations that political activity must be directed at, without specifying any historical outcomes or its forms of political and ideological struggle. This is a 'Marxism without Guarantees' (op cit p83-84). This treatment of ideology and subjectivity as provisional, articulated ensembles was used by Hall throughout the 1980s to analyse a range of concrete organic ideologies, most importantly that of Thatcherism, which will be examined later in this chapter. (For other examples, see Hall 1985B and 1996G, the latter originally written in 1985).

## **Cultural Studies and Articulation**

Although Hall's focus primarily fell on the analysis of ideology in the 1980s, he did produce two key interventions in the domain of cultural studies that have become highly influential for later developments in that field. Here the particular cultural formations of popular culture and the discipline of cultural studies itself are treated as 'doubly articulated' entities in a manner consonant with his new approach to ideologies.

### **Popular Culture as a Battlefield**

In his short but hugely influential article 'Deconstructing the popular' (Hall 1981D), Hall outlines a new treatment of this cultural domain as a zone of political contestation. He

begins by stressing that it is the external articulation of popular culture to the broader fields of cultural and social relations (and their political struggles) that has historically determined both its content and the transformations it has undergone. There has been a continual struggle waged by dominant forces and popular classes to shape and/or resist the contours of this culture as part of the wider contest for hegemonic mastery, one undertaken upon a changing cultural terrain structured into dominant and subordinate formations. As forms, popular cultures are never pure and coherent. They neither authentically express working class existence nor reflect the superimposition of alien, dominant cultures. Instead they are complex and contradictory entities, whose content and position in the cultural field are determined by their internal form and their external articulation to cultural and social practices and forces. Along both of these dimensions they are historically open to further rearticulation and transformation (Hall 1981D p227-231).

The dynamics of cultural struggle involve recurrent attempts to demarcate elite from popular culture, and the contestation of cultural traditions by political forces aiming to constitute a new 'national-popular' will through their disarticulation and rearticulation (3). On such a terrain, there are no universal links between classes and cultural traditions – these are, at best, provisional articulations, open to challenge and recolonisation by rival forces, a practice that alters the original meanings of the cultural form too. The popular is therefore a field irreducible to class, designating the 'popular classes' who confront the 'power bloc' and their cultural power to define the whole cultural arena. This then becomes the central contradiction of the entire terrain, underwriting the specificity of cultural struggle.

However, 'the people' is an indeterminate category, open to variable construction from classes and individuals as a popular force. It can either act with the power bloc as a populist support (as in Thatcherism) or as a popular-democratic cultural force in the construction of a socialist alternative, unifying the array of progressive forces under its expansive banner. Hall concludes that popular culture is central to processes of hegemony, with the production of a socialist culture through the elaboration of a national-popular collective will now being a major task for the Left (Hall 1981D p235-239).

This conception of popular culture became massively influential in Cultural Studies in the next two decades, prompting a deluge of investigations into the political dimensions of cultural forms and practices and their potential for cultural and political resistance.

However, as a number of critics have demonstrated, there has been an increasing tendency for these studies to lose any sense of the structural constraints upon popular cultural forms, their containment by dominant cultural forces. Instead we have seen an uncritical and voluntaristic 'celebration' of symbolic popular resistance inscribed in such unlikely practices as shopping and watching TV, that is rendered as politically significant (see McGuigan 1992; Harris 1992; Morley 1992; Mulhern 2000). At the limit, in the works of John Fiske and Paul Willis, the equation reads: 'popular culture = creative consumption = political action'. Hall himself later distanced himself from such a position, criticising its neglect of the structuring power of dominant ideas over the whole cultural field and its popular cultural forms (Hall 1988B p44-45). Others have questioned whether Hall's perspective is in fact part of the problem here, due to its avoidance of the economic and political constraints on cultural struggle and rearticulation in the name of 'anti-

reductionism' (McGuigan 1992 p40-41,244-245; Mulhern 2000). I will return to this larger issue later on.

### **Cultural Studies as Historically Articulated Theory**

Hall's narration of the development of Cultural Studies in terms of its continual "articulation of theory and history" follows a similar path. This elite cultural formation is also doubly determined through its links to the wider social environment and the new theoretical and political challenges thrown up by its historical trajectory. These challenges are then internally assimilated within the discipline, producing new approaches and theoretical transformations. Hall considers this historical mobility and openness to be a safeguard against any dogmatic installation of a fixed orthodoxy, securing a 'conjunctural practice' ever alive to changing contexts and evolving in response to them. It is an open project, internally diverse but framed by a guiding concern to develop a 'non-reductionist theory of cultures and social formations' (Hall 1980A p15-16,37-42; Hall 1980B p57).

Hall identifies a series of breaks or transformations that have marked its development up to the end of the 1970s (when he left CCCS). Emerging in the late 1950s, cultural studies was founded on a new approach to culture developed by the likes of Raymond Williams, EP Thompson and Richard Hoggart in a series of works expanding its scope to cover popular traditions and their links to other social practices. This theoretical break with existing elitist and literary treatments paved the way for later breakthroughs, though was itself unable to forge a fully-fledged alternative due to its essentialist and humanist presuppositions (Hall



1980A p16-17; 1980B p58). It was a moment also clearly linked to external determinants, with the political rise of the New Left and their concern for mapping the post-war changes in class and culture.

The institutionalisation of the discipline with the founding of CCCS in the 1960s preceded a second decisive break, one marked by the social conflicts of that decade and the appearance of the key texts of Western Marxism. Historically unable to respond to this changing landscape, existing sociological paradigms gave way to a new non-reductionist Marxism, seeking to relate to these new conflicts and forces. A new problematic for analysing cultures and their external relations resulted from this shift (Hall 1980A p25-29). This position of 'relative autonomy' overturned the essentialist and humanist perspectives of Williams and co. It stressed the social constitution of subjectivity as an unconscious process and held a non-reductionist vision of the social formation and its internal relations, centred upon notions of articulation, relatively autonomous levels and complex unities. These were then mobilised to explain class–culture and economy–society relationships.... the moment of Althusser and the Structuralisms (Hall 1980A p29-34; 1980B p65-69). For Hall the functionalist and ahistorical excesses of this 'anti-humanist' turn were offset by a concurrent appropriation of Gramsci. His perspectives on the historically provisional and conjuncturally specific nature of social and cultural processes introduced a welcome anti-determinist focus on struggle and contestation over social reproduction. Historical outcomes now depended upon the efforts of political forces to master the whole social formation through cultural and ideological leadership of a bloc of social forces, a non-reductionist vision of the constitutive role of culture (Hall 1980A p33-36; 1980B p68-69).

Hall's account ends with the identification of a third break in the discipline – the impact of feminism reflecting its growth as a social movement. Attempts to incorporate it within CCCS destabilised existing positions, highlighting their abiding 'complex class reductionism' hidden within the anti-reductionist treatment of culture. This pointed the way towards new theorisations of determination and production that recognise a plurality of structuring principles irreducible to class (Hall 1980A p38-39). The open project of cultural studies and its theoretical rearticulation in response to new historical developments thus continues. He concludes by briefly discussing a range of other positions that lie beyond the boundaries of this 'open project' (Discourse Theory, Foucault, the Political Economy of Culture). These are all rejected because of their various ahistorical, idealist and reductionist tendencies. For Hall, Cultural Studies is a resolutely materialist, anti-reductionist and historically-specific project (Hall 1980A p36-37; 1980B p70-71).

Again Hall's narrative of the discipline has proved extremely influential upon later conceptualisations. His own from the 1990s continue its focus and register two further theoretical transformations centred upon the impact of race and racism, and, later, globalisation (Hall 1996B p268-270; 1996D p392-399,406-408).

The need to relate cultural studies to its external environment is also reinforced in the face of prevailing tendencies towards idealism and formalism. He insists on examining the variable articulations between culture and power and the necessity for 'cultural politics', relating theoretical work to the domain of political practice (Hall 1990A p17-18,22; 1996B p263-268; 1996D p395-396; 1996E p287; 1997B p24-25). Despite this recurrent stress, we shall see later that there are in fact substantial shifts occurring here in Hall's perspective on

the historical transformations of cultural studies, a feature that is intimately related to profound weaknesses in his whole overarching perspective on ‘the articulation of theory and history’. This point is elaborated further in Chapter 6.

## 2

### **The Challenge of Thatcherism**

Finally, we come to the celebrated analysis of Thatcherism as a hegemonic political project which occupied so much of Hall’s time in the 1980s. Building upon his appropriations of Gramsci and Laclau, Hall argues that Thatcherism has instinctively pursued an anti-reductionist, anti-deterministic and historically specific approach to the conquest of political power. Furthermore, this shows the Left how it too must act strategically to become a viable political force again. The established coordinates of Left analysis and strategy are here considered as obstacles to its future renewal at the levels of both theory and practice, a renewal that must flow from an appreciation of the new social realities and contexts it now faces, as well as an altered mode of political intervention. My concern in this chapter is with the analytical challenge Thatcherism posed to the Left. The question of strategy will be dealt with in the following critical review of Hall’s works.

## **Theoretical sources**

It is in the works of Gramsci and Laclau that Hall discovers the required conceptual apparatus to deliver his ‘concrete analysis of a concrete situation’ currently unfolding in British society during the 1980s (Hall 1987B p vi-vii).

In the case of Gramsci Hall draws on his earlier appropriations used to narrate the succession of historically-specific conjunctures in post-war Britain, as well as more general arguments concerning the active creation and contesting of class rule and the centrality of popular consent to hegemonic politics which we detailed in the previous chapter. He now deepens this perspective, stressing Gramsci’s triple rejection of forms of reductionism, determinism and universalism within Marxism under the influence of Laclau, whose own theoretical positions are now retrospectively seen as being prefigured in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks. We will need to consider carefully the accuracy of such an interpretation of Gramsci later on.

In terms of historical specificity Hall picks out Gramsci’s focus upon the national particularity of any given social formation and its current conjunctural array of forces and processes. The dynamic nature of the object of Marxist analysis further implies a constant conceptual updating to respond to new conditions and phenomena – in this case the popular impact of Thatcherism and the new plurality of social antagonisms – in order to be able to politically engage with and transform this historically specific set of circumstances (Hall 1988A p161-163,167-170; Hall 1996F p413-415,435, originally written in 1986).

As for the enduring issue of reductionism Hall argues Gramsci showed us both the insufficiency of its economic and class variants (having previously concentrated only on the former). Socially, there now exists an expanded field of social and political relations and antagonisms, which must be politically addressed and mastered across a variety of social sites and through different kinds of contestation. We can no longer rely on foundational class relations as the basis for a politics that is unilaterally directed at 'smashing the state'. Instead, we need Gramsci's vision of hegemonic politics as a multidimensional practice possessing a complex social base. This operates within a multitude of institutional sites in civil society and upon the increasingly complex terrain of an expanded state. This new state form performs an 'ethical' role, culturally acting to unify a complex bloc of allies into a definite regime of rule and secure popular consent behind a particular project. Once again, Hall insists, there are no objective guarantees hidden within any conjuncture that could historically deliver a specific political resolution. A project of unification depends on the nature of the strategies launched by contending political forces and, if successful, on its continual efforts to remain dominant (Hall 1988A p168-170; 1996F p420-430).

This alternative to class reductionism increases the already important and irreducible role of cultural politics and ideological struggle in Marxist analysis and strategy.

1) It expands the 'organisational' role of an organic ideology, which must cement together diverse social forces into a national-popular will through their ideological representation.

This extends to the actual construction of their social identities and interests (Hall 1988A p167-168; 1996F p432).

2) The realm of the popular as a site for intervention becomes more salient with the historic emergence of new social antagonisms and forces whose popular-democratic concerns (for sexual equality, anti-racism, the environment) are irreducible to class. These forces are open to ideological rearticulation by political movements operating with an expansive conception of the political and taking seriously the issue of popular consent (Hall 1987B p vii; 1988A p170; 1996F p430-433,439).

3) This new social plurality also radically alters the nature of subjectivity. In place of the old unified self, we now confront a multifaceted and composite entity possessing an array of social identities. It is a fragmented, 'dispersed' self always open to political recruitment by any political project willing to address at least some of these constituent 'selves' and forge a new conception of 'the people' as its social base (Hall 1988A p6-8,10,167,169; 1996F p433).

4) Each of these dimensions of ideological intervention and struggle involve a common process of 'disarticulation – rearticulation'. This denotes the active struggle to dismantle old alignments and construct new ones between elements in different discourses and between social forces and ideas. Hegemonic politics turns on this 'double articulation' of new social identities, interests and collective subjects (Hall 1988A p6-8,170-173; 1996F p434).

The third strand of Gramsci's approach Hall identifies concerns his rejection of determinism. Gramsci showed us the lack of any historical guarantees existing within a

conjuncture between its objective conditions and political outcomes, that is, the necessary contingency of social and cultural processes, one amply demonstrated in the aftermath of the 1914-1918 war in Italy. What actually results historically always depends on the character of the strategies launched by contending forces seeking to master the existing circumstances and antagonisms, and thereby attain hegemony over the whole social order. This then implies the two other fundamental principles already covered – the need for anti-reductionist and historically specific analysis and strategy, in order to intervene politically and culturally within the particular configuration of social forces and strategies currently operative. For Gramsci politics was a ‘production’, not a reflection, an articulation of particular forms of power. The political terrain was actually defined by the nature of the existing political and cultural interventions undertaken (‘the conjunctural’), a moving configuration of the ‘relations of force’ that all future strategies must reckon with, and definitely irreducible to ‘the economic’ (Hall 1988A p48,56,128,169; 1996F p422-423).

Unlike previous Marxisms, Gramsci’s did not perceive social crisis to be a wholly economic phenomenon with one form of (class) struggle and a pre-given result. Instead it signified a complex and specific unity of different contradictions and struggles, going beyond the economic to cover social, moral and sexual issues as well as current modes of political representation. It is a deep-rooted ‘organic’ crisis, a contingent moment with no pre-ordained end.

Hall goes on to argue that, for Gramsci, in such a crisis the development of the ‘relations of force’ is vital, since it is within the arena of political struggle and intervention that the specific resolution of the whole crisis emerges. The range of political and cultural strategies

launched to secure such a resolution becomes a determining factor and terrain for all future interventions in the 'war of position', success here bringing about a shift in the 'relations of force' that can seriously constrain rival responses. This is the field of 'the conjunctural', one demonstrating the nature of social crisis as an arena of struggle rather than a given set of objective conditions. Upon this terrain, the efforts of conservative forces cannot be merely defensive (restoring the old order) but must be 'formative', designed to secure a new settlement and balance of forces. They must attempt ideologically to re-present the crisis and offer a new solution to gain popular support, working on the given field of social forces and ideologies to dismantle existing political and ideological formations in favour of their own, a radical realignment that conserves through reform (Hall 1988A p127-133,164-168). Thatcherism's instinctive appreciation of this underdetermination of the concrete situation by its 'objective conditions' is seen by Hall as central to its political success. Such a success is however then rendered without taking fully into account the enduring material limitations of this context, a theme I will return to, noting the consequences it brings for Hall's analysis, in Chapter 7.

As for Laclau Hall takes on board his non-class reductionist perspective upon ideology, the social formation and the production of social subjects outlined above.

These fundamentally displace traditional Left notions of the social and its constitutive processes and forces as centred upon class relations, invoking a more open, historically fluid perspective on the character of social processes, their interrelations and their subjects. These are now the results of 'articulatory practices', of political and ideological interventions, rather than being fixed by determinations exercised by objective structures.



In this ‘social without guarantees’, all historical outcomes depend upon ‘the politics of articulation’.

## **The Rise of Thatcherism**

Hall then uses these themes to understand the successes of Thatcherism as a political project of ‘authoritarian populism’ both in opposition and in government. He praises its keen, instinctive grasp of the contours of hegemonic politics – rejecting the disabling commitments to reductionism, determinism and universalistic perspectives that so disfigure Left theory and practice. Central to its dominance has been the recognition that a given economic situation represents an open field of political possibility, underdetermined and with no guaranteed historical outcomes. It was possible to intervene and mobilise upon this terrain, challenging existing political forces and constructing popular support for an alternative ‘solution’ through the effective prosecution of a hegemonic political project. Hall sets out to demonstrate exactly how Thatcherism did so, becoming the dominant political force in Britain from the late 1970s onwards.

In its years of opposition, Hall focuses on the political operations and manoeuvres that Thatcherism launched against existing political formations and upon the terrain of popular common sense in its bid for political power. He begins with a delineation of the conjuncture Thatcherism emerged within, a complex conjunction of contradictions that precipitated a deep, organic social crisis. The onset of a generalised capitalist economic crisis that dominant political forces sought merely to contain through corporatist strategies signalled the historic exhaustion of Labourist social democracy. Prioritising capital

accumulation over working class interests it became increasingly detached from its core class base, prompting a working class 'revolt' and the possibility for alternative political forces to capture this dissatisfaction for their own, very different projects. Such a force was simultaneously emerging in the political realm, offering a new solution beyond the post-war consensus and its political representatives (social democracy and moderate Toryism). Thatcherism attacked these discredited political opponents and built popular support for its alternative by exposing their internal contradictions and anti-popular statist orientations, ideologically positioning itself on the side of the dissatisfied people and their concerns. Here it was able to capture the pre-existing tide of ideological reaction that had begun in the wake of '1968', one Hall had already addressed in *Policing The Crisis* (Hall 1988A p43-46,134-138).

Its own particular solution to the 'crisis of hegemony' facing Britain was a far-reaching alternative designed to transform the existing nature of social and economic relations, the character of political struggles and of popular beliefs. This dismantling of the post-war consensus and its historic compromise between capital and labour was an attempt to conserve British capitalism through 'radical reform', a move going beyond the purely defensive strategies of its political rivals. It revealed here an instinctive grasp of Gramsci's recognition of the open-endedness of social crises and their possible resolution through the application of a particular political will, or 'crisis as a time of opportunity'. To succeed, Thatcherism had to secure its own historic bloc of social forces and popular consent through the modalities of political and ideological intervention, a truly hegemonic task (Hall op cit p125-126,146,163-165).

The major political antagonist Thatcherism faced was Social Democracy, dominant political incarnation of the post-war consensus. It launched a series of ideological assaults on this declining political formation and its increasingly dissatisfied electorate, who were seeing past gains wiped out as economic retrenchment was implemented at the expense of its living standards and working conditions. Thatcherism worked on the internal contradictions of the social democratic compact, addressing popular discontents over its statist, bureaucratic direction of economic and social life, and seeking to win support for an alternative, anti-statist and anti-collectivist, free market project. Here, long-standing popular grievances on the bureaucratic nature of the corporatist state, its anti-popular character, could be drawn on to mobilise support. Hall insists this popular support was no ideological con trick on the part of Thatcherism, but one rooted in real, popular experiences. It was created through an extensive ideological campaign that linked popular discontents to an alternative philosophy of individualism and freedom secured through the free market, opposing state intervention and its bureaucratic 'oppression' of the British people. By doing so, Thatcherism gained a significant purchase upon current popular experiences and began to transform the vital terrain of common sense, eroding the old popular values of fair shares, collective provision and state redistribution upheld by social democracy (Hall 1988A p45-52,56,134-136,142,186-187,190-191).

Hall sees in this strategy an instinctive appreciation by Thatcherism of the centrality of the terrain of popular ideologies for a hegemonic political project. He argues it is crucial to successfully intervene here, building a degree of popular consent *prior* to the assumption of state power, in order to create a more favourable ideological climate for future state

policies and interventions. Popular ideologies and moralities are a material force says Hall, the everyday languages of calculation and understanding that organise and define the experiences of the masses and their identities. Any political project must aim to penetrate this realm, with its contradictory and class neutral amalgam of ideas and experiences, and resonate with some of its aspirations and ways of life, if it is to generate durable popular support.

According to Hall, Thatcherism did so extensively, connecting with its more traditional elements, with certain popular discontents and fears, and reworking them in a more authoritarian direction. For example, it linked popular fears about street crime to earlier demands for a return to a 'law and order' society, mapping the crime issue to wider scenarios of moral degeneration and a crisis of authority – the drive for a populist and authoritarian solution Hall previously identified in *Policing The Crisis*. This “authoritarian populism” depends upon a specific ideological re-presentation of popular fears and experiences, presenting them as part of a much more general movement for social restoration and tradition. Thatcherism developed a range of discourses in relation to different realms of popular experience, drawing out its more conservative elements and connecting them to its wider polemics over education, welfare, race and the family, all in the name of a return to values of individual self-reliance and the old traditions of British culture. By these means it built a substantial degree of popular consent for its own particular solution to the current crisis (Hall op cit p6,8,52-55,136-138,142-146,167,188-190).

In explaining the political rise of Thatcherism Hall draws on Laclau's notion of the 'people / power bloc' contradiction to designate the key site and agents of political struggle. These collective agents are complex social blocs (not whole homogeneous classes) formed in the realms of politics and ideology, rather than merely reflecting objective economic interests. Their contestation occurs on the terrain of 'the popular', an open realm of indeterminate ideas and experiences available for variable political recruitment by projects seeking to produce a version of the people as a collective subject, consonant with their own strategies. Thatcherism effectively worked this terrain, aligning itself with a new vision of 'the people' (as individualist, conservative and freedom loving) against the social democratic power bloc and its 'statist oppression'. It generated popular consent and produced a new populist collective subject through a series of interventions that touched popular experiences. Such a mobilisation had definite limits however. The Thatcherite project was an alternative capitalist solution to the British crisis, and as such definitely part of the power bloc it ideologically poses against in its challenge to social democracy. It allowed only a populist, rather than popular-democratic mobilisation, limiting the scope of popular discontents to those attributable to 'statism', rather than the underlying capitalist system itself. A traditionalist populist vision of the people is the result, one pitted against organised labour and excluding radical popular ideas and experiences. This populist entity is kept firmly within the overarching dynamic of a return to authority, producing an 'authoritarian populism' (Hall 1988A p6-7,49-50,71,140-142,146).

By 1979 Hall argues that Thatcherism had secured a sufficient degree of popular consent to achieve electoral victory through its political and ideological operations. It made a definite

impact upon the terrain of the popular, defining and shaping the current crisis and how it was lived for increasing numbers of people, and thereby shifting the political balance of 'the relations of forces' and the contours of common sense decisively to the right. A new historic bloc of social forces was forged behind its programme of radical reform. This had a significant impact beyond the issue of electoral victory. As a political force Thatcherism was now transforming the very nature of the terrain on which future political struggles would occur, 'the conjunctural', to the detriment of its political opponents (Hall op cit p48,56,146,167). And all this had been achieved despite the internal contradictions of its ideological formation, which simultaneously called for less state intervention in economic and welfare arenas (in the name of the 'free market') and increasing intervention in social, political and moral domains, to re-impose social authority. This 'free market-strong state' combination did not diminish its historical effectiveness as an organic ideology capable of popular mobilisation. According to Hall, such ideologies actually work through their articulation of different subjects, aspirations and projects into a 'unified' complex entity – it is their mobilising quality that is their vital principle, not logical consistency (Hall op cit p10,48,157,165-166).

## **Thatcherism in power**

With the assumption of state power after 1979 Hall's analysis of Thatcherism broadens from its earlier concerns on ideological contestation of dominant political and popular-cultural formations. He now examines the broad contours of its programme of social and

economic restructuring, and the attempts to secure hegemonic leadership over the whole social formation by addressing a wide range of social issues and struggles (beyond those traditionally associated with ‘the political’) thereby assembling an enduring bloc of social forces from the plurality of groups and interests ranged across civil society. Despite this the question of popular consent and its re-creation remains prominent. The assumption of state power actually enhances this quest, insofar as it is a main function of the modern state to engage in ‘ethical’ (that is, cultural and educational) struggles, in order to secure its core purpose of ‘conforming’ the broader fields of social relations to the demands of a political project (Hall op cit p3,7,85,230,273-275).

“...the moment when you get sufficient power in the state to organise a central political project is decisive, for then you can use the state to plan, urge, incite, solicit and punish, to conform the different sites of power and consent into a single regime” (Hall 1988A p168-169).

That Thatcherism actually embodied a contradictory orientation to state power and its role in a future free market Britain did not inhibit its operations here. It sought to ‘win’ the state in order to ‘roll it back’ in favour of free market alternatives, and in doing so, often increased its centralising powers and regulatory functions (Hall 1988A p85-6,225,227,277-279; 1988D p9).

The programme of social and economic restructuring Thatcherism introduced was designed to dismantle the post-war structures and priorities of social democracy. It set out to destroy the long established mixed economy with its strong public sector, expanded welfare state, policies for full employment and the general commitment for state intervention to limit the inequalities resulting from ‘market forces’. In its place it offered an

historic reversal to free market provision of economic and social goods and services (Hall 1988A p4,86,203,227,233-234; 1988D p8).

Hall's main focus here fell on the role of the privatisation programme as an instrument of social and economic reform – and tellingly within this, upon its ideological dimensions and consequences. This choice of analytical focus is, as we shall see, not unusual.

The shift from public provision of social goods to a future private supply encouraged an ideological break towards a philosophy of individualism amongst the masses, remaking common sense to identify with the free market as sole and best provider of all goods and services, in the face of declining public health care, housing and education. This is the core dynamic underpinning Thatcherism's assaults on high-spending local authorities, the institutional structure of comprehensive education and the NHS.

And it was accompanied throughout by an ideological crusade to win popular consent for free market capitalist solutions to all social ills and problems (Hall op cit p206,233-237,262-263). This strategy was reinforced by the wider ideological 'thematic'

Thatcherism had already secured, concerning the greater efficiency and choice offered by the market in place of the waste, ineffectiveness and bureaucratic inertia of the public sector (op cit p206,272-275). Holding this ideological high ground, Thatcherism was easily able to see off rival demands for more public spending to improve the NHS, etc.

In the sphere of education, a lengthy ideological campaign again paralleled plans to reintroduce selection and inequality through the mechanism of privatisation – local management of schools, open enrolment and per capita funding being the market-style mechanisms employed here to 'promote parental choice and raise educational standards' (Hall 1988A p52-54,82,262-263; 1983B p2-4,9-10; 1988D p8,10). What this shows is the



profoundly strategic nature of the Thatcherite project, its insistent combination of social restructuring with ideological moves to construct popular support for its free market alternative (Hall 1988A p274-275). What it also shows us is Hall's preference for the ideological impact of Thatcherism over any detailed consideration of its social and economic consequences.

As for economic policy Hall's view of Thatcherism's impact moved from an initial estimation of monetarism as a failed strategy for reviving British capitalism, towards a recognition of its reconstruction of Britain as an 'open economy' in a global capitalist world (Hall 1988A p87,155,164-165,265; 1988D p9-10; 1980J p27). This is a strategy of 'uneven modernisation' abandoning efforts to revive a national manufacturing base, in favour of an internationally competitive sector based in financial services and high-tech industries. The result was a dramatic deindustrialisation of traditional manufacturing regions and severe social problems, stretching from mass unemployment to urban riots (Hall 1988A p69,77-79,81,165; 1987A p45-50).

Hall later links this strategy to the emergence of a far broader set of social, economic and cultural changes that are reshaping the nature of contemporary capitalism, which Thatcherism is seen as trying to respond to. A new era of 'disorganised capitalism' is upon us, fragmenting existing workforces, communities and social-political identities with its profoundly individualising dynamics. The resulting dislocation was capitalised on by Thatcherism, attracting support through strategies of privatisation, aimed at discrete groups and individuals in order to weaken collective rights and labour organisation. This politically segmented existing constituencies and built a new majority for the free market solution – for example through tax cuts and privatisations aimed at the employed working

class (Hall 1988A p87-90,243-246,259,275-276,281). Here the Thatcherite project is seen by Hall as attempting to implement its modernisation in accordance with the new, historically-specific features characterising the conjuncture.

In tandem with this socio-economic programme, Thatcherism continued to engage in ideological struggle and secure popular consent. Hall argues it instinctively knew that hegemony is not a given state of affairs but a question of incessant interventions to construct ‘social authority’ throughout society. Therefore it coupled the introduction of each socio-economic programme or policy with an ideological offensive to win consent and “realign the whole of society with its project” (Hall 1988D p9).

Hall demonstrates a number of ideological strategies and themes that have been deployed to pursue this form of hegemonic politics. First of all, Thatcherism elaborated a strategic vision of the future for British society, its principles of organisation and the nature of its subjects. This ‘philosophy of life’ was repeatedly enunciated in relation to each area of social life, thereby coming to take root in public consciousness and create a new kind of common sense (Hall 1988A p164,172,189,191,206,227,277-278).

This social philosophy was then ideologically mobilised by Thatcherism each time it faced a strong challenge to its project. It acted to de-legitimise and defeat its opponents by drawing on the core discourses of the free market as economic and social provider, and of the need for social authority, to see off the diverse challenges posed by high-spending local authorities, striking workers and urban rioters (op cit p75-76,82-83,233-234,265). The philosophy of ‘free market – strong state’ was also deployed to counter alternative social philosophies (social democracy, socialism), locking everyone culturally into the economic

and political reality of a market future (the famous ‘There Is No Alternative’). Even in the face of severe social problems, such as mass unemployment, Thatcherism continued to hold ideological sway, insisting no other option to the free market solution was possible, because none of its opponents were able to break the identification of ‘economics = market forces’ and develop a credible case for state intervention, public works programmes, etc (Hall op cit p189-191,198,202,205-206).

At the level of popular ideologies, successive engagements were made to construct a new version of ‘the people’ in Thatcherite guise. For Hall this is a central concern of hegemonic politics, recognising the gulf that exists between objective social position and political identification: “unless people identify with and become the subjects of a new conception of society, it cannot materialise” (Hall 1988A p282). The subject invoked here is a freedom-loving and traditionalist entity, entrepreneurial, conservative, patriarchal and ethnocentric. Its construction involved the disarticulation of existing popular conceptions (the Us/Them corporate consciousness of the social democratic era) and the realignment of ‘the people’ *against* the organised working class. Through wide-ranging interventions across many social spheres Thatcherism imposed a new ‘moral agenda’, based on traditional views of culture, the nation and family life, and ranged against permissive and alien elements, that people have come to identify themselves with (op cit p8,90-91,141-145,179,191-193,277,282). The empirical evidence for this is not however apparent from Hall’s discussion.

Finally, continuing efforts were made to connect with some of the real cultural traces, experiences and contradictions found on the complex terrain of common sense, and link

these to the wider Thatcherite project, winning people over to its side. Hall highlights the genuine popularity of the market in post-war Britain as a popular-cultural trend open to political exploitation by Thatcherism. Popular expectations and experiences have been radically altered by the growth of consumer capitalism, providing choice and capacities for experimentation. Thatcherism addressed such popular aspirations, aligning them with its project of restoring market forces to social and economic pre-eminence, and thereby forged a populist base for itself. It successfully connected (or rearticulated) popular demands for greater freedom with the market definition of freedom, naturalising itself within popular experience (Hall 1988A p208,212-219,228-230).

The final strand of Hall's analysis of Thatcherism 'in power' concerns its impact on the terrain of political struggle and the nature of its mode of political representation. With its electoral victory in 1979, Thatcherism signalled a marked rightwards shift in the balance of 'the relations of force', transforming the terrain of political struggle. Once in power, Thatcherism continued to press its claims on 'the conjunctural', aiming to fundamentally realign its contours through a strategic and multifaceted programme that linked social restructuring to ideological campaigning:-

"Thatcherism is always, and consistently multifaceted. It always moves on several fronts at once. It moulds people's conceptions as it restructures their lives as it shifts the disposition of forces to its side" (Hall 1988A p274-275; p206,262-263).

Although encountering initial resistance from the organised working class and social democratic elements in the power bloc, the stubborn persistence of the Thatcherites allowed them to make substantial headway during the 1980s (op cit p59-60,65-67). In this

they were unwittingly assisted by the failures of the Left to engage in *any* form of hegemonic politics, thereby giving it free rein over the reshaping of this arena (op cit p67). Hall says a key feature of Thatcherism's success lay in its appreciation of the active nature of the process of political representation and the open-endedness of political identities. Because of this it willingly engaged in ideological struggle to construct a social base for its project (an 'historic bloc') from the given disposition of social forces. Its capturing of substantial working class support through addressing certain real experiences and dissatisfactions indicates the lack of any universal 'objective' class interests and the necessary production of political interests and identities through effective political action. According to Hall social interests are, in fact, conflicting, contingent entities, open to variable ideological definition and political recruitment. They must be made and won through strategic efforts, constructing new political subjects, as Thatcherism amply demonstrated (Hall 1988A p167,179,261-262,281).

In terms of the constitution of its historic bloc Hall argued Thatcherism established a complex representation of interests, distinct from any simple voicing of ruling-class concerns. Through its active articulation of different social and economic interests within its project, Thatcherism was already engaged in the re-definition of class interests through this very re-presentation. In the realm of class relations, it drew broad support across all locations, identifying with new strata of the ruling classes, the private-sector fraction of the middle classes, and, crucially, the skilled and clerical sectors of the working class. It repeatedly attempted to segment and incorporate the employed working class from its unemployed fraction through offering selective incentives (shares, tax cuts) consonant with free market priorities (Hall 1988A p4-8,87-89,264-266).

The social base of Thatcherism was wider than any cross class alliance however. Its intervention on a range of social issues and antagonisms beyond traditional politics – moral conduct, gender, race, national identity – enabled it to assume a leading position in a number of social spheres, generating support from social forces outside class relations. In doing so, it built a “complex and heterogeneous social composition of power and domination” into a strategic alliance or ‘collective will’, an articulation of ‘unity-in-diversity’ that all hegemonic projects must aim for in societies where the sites of power and politics are rapidly expanding ( op cit p7-8,90-91,154,168-170,262) (4). Later on we will have cause to question exactly how panoramic was its appeal across social life.

## **Conclusion**

Hall’s analysis of Thatcherism is consistently tied to a concern for renewing Left politics in relation to the demands of modern society and its changing configuration. For Hall, Thatcherism demonstrates to the Left what a hegemonic politics must involve to become an organic, successful and historically effective force. This will be covered fully in the following chapters but we can here, by way of conclusion, recount the salient points of Thatcherism as ‘authoritarian populism’.

- 1) It operated on the central principle of the lack of any guarantees between a set of economic conditions and their political and cultural outcomes - the latter depend on the character of the interventions made by rival political forces to master the specificities of 'the conjuncture';
- 2) It accepted the provisional nature of social power and the need to continually intervene and re-create popular consent for its project, addressing the strategic and underdetermined terrain of popular common sense through cultural and ideological struggle to win 'the people';
- 3) It moved across the broad range of social sites where power is now constituted, engaging with a diverse range of issues and social forces to cement a complex social bloc behind it;
- 4) Finally, it concentrated on the specific objective and subjective forces and trends that characterise and determine the conjuncture it operates within and seeks to transform.

In sum then, Thatcherism stands as the concrete analytical and strategic model for that renewal Hall advocates under the banner of a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. In the following chapters we will critically discuss the likelihood of such an option, as well as the actual validity of Hall's reading of Thatcherism as a political success story. It is, to say the least, somewhat strange to find the missing pieces for Left analysis and strategy contained within the contemporary practice of such a political adversary – one that apparently, if often instinctively, understands and acts upon the parameters of hegemonic politics better than any Left political formation, including those that have hitherto made Gramsci a key theoretical source of their theory and practice!!

That must be one reason for the critical hostility that Hall's analysis provoked among sections of the Left in the 1980s. Despite that we cannot simply dismiss their responses as a knee-jerk reaction to unpalatable truths – Hall's favoured reaction in *The Hard Road To Renewal*. For there are, as we shall now see, serious critiques of his perspective mounted from among the 'orthodoxy' that do penetrate to the heart of this approach, illustrating both analytical and strategic shortcomings.



## Notes

1. We must note here that the strength of Laclau's influence on Hall is somewhat surprising. Unlike his earlier appropriations of Althusser and Gramsci, Laclau enjoyed none of their reputation as major interpreters and advocates of Marxism that would account for Hall's receptiveness to his work. Certainly he was offering a new model of ideology to the Left, which obviously resonated with some of the academic Marxist community but, beyond this, Hall has never explained why Laclau's intervention was so significant. Indeed as we shall see, his own comments upon the impact of Laclau on his work are somewhat deceptive. Equally significant is the one-sidedness of this relationship, for Hall has not featured in the output of Laclau during the years of Thatcherism.
2. There are obvious echoes here of the type of reading of Marx's mature perspectives on the social formation and processes of class formation Hall made in previous works. Here Marx is 're-presented' as a "proto-Laclau", in an analogous way to the "proto-Althusserian" leanings previously 'disinterred' by Hall.
3. Hall here concentrates on the latter dimension. The elite/popular demarcation has become a key concern for Cultural Studies in the wake of Hall's intervention.
4. Elsewhere Hall is forced to scale down the impact of Thatcherism, noting its failure to secure a majority social bloc or preponderant consent from subordinate classes (Hall 1988A p91). In lieu of this genuine hegemonic state, he claims it has fallen back on the assembling of 'symbolic majorities', an 'imaginary community' for its project, one that mobilises the crucial two-thirds identifying with its vision. This is achieved through the political composition of selectively-targeted social minorities, attracted through differential incentives – for example, shares for employed workers (op cit p88-91, 262-265).

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **ON HISTORICAL SPECIFICITY**

Having completed our exposition of Hall's complex Marxism, we can now pass on to an extended critical review of its central tendencies, beginning with that of historical specificity. For Hall, the central task of Marxism as a living body of theory and practice is to produce a 'concrete analysis of concrete situations'. We must grasp the particular concrete shape of the social relations or processes under consideration, including their novel features, in order to master them theoretically and politically. At both levels we need to maintain an open perspective rather than adhere to fixed, universalistic principles and strategies, to respond effectively to new phenomena and situations thrown up by the continual development of capitalism.

This commitment to historical specificity is one we have heard voiced by Hall throughout his complex Marxist period. Methodologically, the reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction signalled a concern for the historically distinct forms of social phenomena and the changing concrete historical shape of social interrelations. In his mature works, Marx was read as providing a template for historically specific analysis of complex social formations, with their shifting internal configurations, and the equally variable modalities of class formation, under the influence of Althusser and Poulantzas. Within the array of cultural studies undertaken at CCCS, Hall stressed the mobile nature of the terrain of cultural relations, showing its particular configuration of class cultures and dynamics of resistance and social

reaction in post-war Britain, and thereby illustrating the transient nature of class–culture relations.

In the subsequent ‘turn to Gramsci’ and focus upon non-class relations, historical specificity again loomed large. One key reason for this theoretical shift was precisely the extra leverage the Gramscian conceptual framework provided in grasping the changing combinations of social relations, forces and processes that Marxism must address, one beyond the universalistic and functionalist cast of much of Althusserianism. In his treatment of race and racism, it was their particularity as historical phenomena that lay to the fore. Abandoning any efforts to deduce a universal basis for this widely found mode of social discrimination and inequality, Hall traced its specific forms and their roots in the equally particular wider social formations it emerges within, for both South Africa and post-war Britain. The latter, in turn, then formed part of the elaborate narration of post-war British history in terms of its shifting modalities of class power and hegemony that stands at the centre of *Policing The Crisis* and its conjunctural analysis of the shift from consensus to coercion.

By the 1980s, under the influence of Laclau, Hall had his conjuncturally-specific optic trained on the terrains of popular culture and ideologies with their provisionally articulated, indeterminate forms and subjectivities. Linked to this was the much broader conjunctural analysis of Thatcherism, tracking its political mastery over the range of contemporary subjective and objective forces and processes characterising this particular ‘concrete situation’, a continuation of the work begun in *Policing The Crisis*.

Throughout all this work Hall consistently addressed the necessity of theoretical change and development in order to respond successfully to a changing social landscape. There is a

continual articulation of theory and history at work, one evident in Marx's shifting treatments of social phenomena, Gramsci's mature reflections on social power after his imprisonment, and in Hall's own mobile theorising. In each case, external social developments have profoundly recast theoretical positions, undermining any efforts at creating a universal, closed body of thought (the illusion of Althusserianism).

We now need to assess the merits of Hall's commitments to 'the conjunctural', 'the new' and the fluidity of historically sensitive theorising.

## **1**

### **Historical Specificity and Social Analysis**

At the most general level, Hall's repudiation of universalism and abstract theoretical positions represents a salutary move towards the variety of concrete combinations of social relations, processes and forces found in 'concrete situations', be they pitched at the level of the entire social formation or one of its constitutive levels or processes (for example, class formation, racial structuring). In terms of his particular analyses, Hall's treatments of the history of race relations in post-war Britain and the changing contours of cultural relations and forms of social authority in this social formation (covered in *Resistance Through Rituals* and *Policing The Crisis* respectively) are often well rounded and persuasive in their conjunctural coverage. It is hard to deny that increasing racism, a gathering climate of

cultural reaction and a turn to coercive power were distinctive and seminal features of the late 1960s–late 1970s timespan. What lets Hall down however is his subsequent identification of which particular features of a distinctive conjuncture are significant, and the consequences he deduces from them, especially at the strategic level.

## **Hall and the New**

The overwhelming focus of Hall's conjunctural analyses falls on the novel social forces and cultural phenomena they exhibit, rather than their objective determinants and processes. Furthermore these new developments are accorded a greater significance than they actually warrant, leading to a fundamental and drastic redrawing of Left theory and practice in order to accommodate their novelty and alleged historical importance.

We have seen this too occur throughout the period of his complex Marxism. In *Resistance Through Rituals* the emergence of the post-war youth subcultures was taken as an indication of the variety of working class responses to capitalist subordination (their 'repertoires of resistance') that alerts us to the shifting conjunctural strategies undertaken by the class in place of some solely 'authentic' revolutionary option. This certainly injects historical variety into Left theory and practice – but surely at the cost of obscuring the structural basis of its political practices, concerning the amelioration or transformation of a mode of production, (the classic 'reform versus revolution' opposition) that is not conjuncturally defined. In identifying a highly visible, flamboyant cultural phenomenon as

politically significant Hall is seemingly signalling a dangerous shift towards a form of historical specificity that is becoming dissociated from the Marxist he sought to revive. The accompanying analysis of the 'ruptural force' provided by the middle-class counter-culture in its cultural challenge to dominant superstructural institutions and norms accentuates this drift. As the subsequent history showed, this cultural force soon dispersed and during the following decades of rightwing ascendancy, 'cultural politics' proved unable to defeat the challenge of Thatcherism. It was left to more traditional and strategically central social agents (the organised working class) to oppose the dynamic of 'authoritarian populism', most vividly in the 1984-85 Miners' Strike.

The narrative of *Policing The Crisis* told a similar story. Hall ended by claiming that the range of active social forces in this conjuncture – the quasi-political revolt of the black wageless (expressed in activities such as mugging) and a defiantly economistic working class – prevented any unified class challenge to capitalist power. Indeed, it was precisely through such conjunctural practices as mugging that the class remained racially divided, allowing capital to defeat it. Once again, spectacular social phenomena (mugging as amplified by the 'control culture') are granted political importance here and taken to imply a rewriting of Left strategy in the name of historical specificity. The structural powers and capacities of the organised working class as a whole do not appear as factors in Hall's account, which is overwhelmingly tied to the conjuncturally visible agents and forces, however marginal they may appear from more traditional Marxist perspectives. In addition, the strategic question of how to unite black and white labour is never properly examined.

Instead Hall focuses on how to incorporate this 'revolt of the wageless' into Left strategy, leading him ultimately to a strategic impasse.

When we reach his work on Thatcherism Hall outlined a range of historically specific factors characterising the current conjuncture that the Left must reckon with theoretically and practically. There were both objective and subjective forces at work here, constituting a radically new social environment for politics.

At the subjective pole Hall highlighted the cultural impact of Thatcherism. This embraced its successful transformation of the terrain of popular ideologies in a rightwards direction, the great inroads made upon the field of elite political formations and its ideological mastery of an expanding range of social antagonisms and sites of power. This cultural and political success had allegedly altered the terrain of political struggle ('the conjunctural') and recast it as an increasingly hostile arena for rival forces to engage upon.

Despite these claims for its cultural power and penetration, Hall was in fact seriously overplaying its novelty as a political force and its transformatory impact on the 'concrete situation'. As many critics have noted, Hall never provided any empirical substantiation for his perspective. In terms of 'the popular' he assumed from the basis of its electoral successes that Thatcherism had generated substantial popular consent and was activating a new reactionary version of 'the people'. However, even in terms of his own earlier treatment of the transmission of ideologies as variable articulations of 'encoding and decoding' he should have theoretically allowed for the possibility of the differential decoding of its 'authoritarian populism' rather than depicting some sort of dominant

ideological monolith at work – precisely the sort of claim he rejected in formulating the ‘encoding – decoding’ model. Also it was equally as plausible, though equally in need of empirical confirmation, that the working class support Thatcherism had electorally secured was pragmatic and conditional rather than due to any conversion to its ethos (Jessop et al 1988 p73-74,78-79,110,118). From those empirical studies that were undertaken at the time, a more contradictory picture emerges, of uneven and variable popular support for Thatcherite policies (Gamble 1988 p216; Phillips 1988 p21-22).

Given that, and the possibility of non-ideological reasons for Thatcherism’s electoral dominance we will examine later, it is not proven that Thatcherism decisively transformed the arena of popular ideologies and implanted pro-market, traditionalist attitudes that the Left would need to ideologically engage with (and ‘rearticulate’) in order to make itself popular once more. Similarly, the rightward shift in the balance of ‘the relations of force’ Hall discussed was not necessarily due to the ideological impact of ‘authoritarian populism’. Other, structural features of hegemonic politics were also at play here according to Jessop et al, ones Hall’s identification of hegemony with ideology neglected (Jessop et al 1988 p110,115,118-119).

Objectively Hall argued a new industrial revolution was unfolding, transforming economic, cultural and social relations, which Thatcherism successfully adapted itself to. This ‘post-Fordist’ thesis was to prove an insecure framework on which to rest his belated turn to the structural context Thatcherism operated in. It too over-exaggerated the impact of ‘the new’, mistaking a range of specific responses made by capital to the combination of deep economic crisis and strong defensive working class organisation, for a new ‘regime of



accumulation' with its potent dynamics of individualism and social pluralisation. Instead, the introduction of new technologies, changing working patterns and a more globalised mode of operation were specific, limited and piecemeal responses by capital, designed to restore power and profitability at labour's expense (Rustin 1989 p62-63; Freeman and Forrest 1988 p20; Wood 1989 p31). Many of the claims contained within the 'post-Fordist' thesis were empirically unproven: in place of a new mode of industrial organisation centred on 'flexible specialisation', a range of different modes was actually being deployed by capital to regain ground (Pollert 1988 p43; Rustin 1989 p58,69). As for the relationship of Thatcherism to these changes, it acted as a particular, national political representative within a much larger international effort by the dominant class to restore its fortunes against labour, a direction clearly evident in its central policies (Rustin op cit p 61-63,75). That must severely undermine Hall's description of it as a unique political formation (1).

## **Understanding the Conjecture**

The problems we have identified above find a common home in Hall's peculiar understanding of the nature of a 'concrete situation'. Francis Mulhern has argued that a serious misinterpretation of Gramsci is evident here. In place of an analysis of the concrete situation rooted in its interrelation of organic ('relatively permanent') constituent features and conjunctural moments (those elements appearing as 'occasional, immediate, almost accidental'), Hall identifies the concrete with the conjunctural alone. The organic is displaced to the abstract level of the mode of production, playing no further part in the

analysis, and attention becomes overwhelmingly concentrated on novel, conjunctural phenomena (Mulhern 2000 p128-129). As a result, the structurally central class relations of ‘the organic’ are of secondary importance to Hall, whilst conjuncturally visible practices and cultural phenomena take centre-stage and are granted ‘political’ significance – the sub-cultural revolts, the revolt of the black wageless, the Thatcherite reworking of the popular in a reactionary guise.

Marginal social phenomena are here conceptually and politically inflated to a degree way beyond their actual merit, whilst the shifts and/or continuities apparent at the level of structural class relations fade into the background. This has serious strategic consequences, as we shall see.

Mulhern makes a valid distinction between ‘the contemporary’ and ‘the new’ in his critique of Hall’s work, contrasting Hall’s “valorisation of the new” with a more balanced orientation to the current situation as a ground on which to base political intervention (Mulhern op cit p118) (2). Throughout his career Hall has insisted on the need to theoretically and politically respond to ‘the new’, from New Left to ‘New Times’ and beyond. What we can see as evident here however is a foreshortening of how the Left should respond to novel developments and phenomena. As Ellen Wood has said, capitalism as a mode of production is characterised by continual change. What matters most is *what* is identified as ‘new’ and *how* we respond to it (Wood 1989 p31).

In Hall’s case he has repeatedly pressed his claims for ‘the new’ in the shape of a polemic to the traditional Left calling on it to redraw its theory and practice radically in the face of new and far-reaching social changes. In *The Hard Road To Renewal* we are urged to

“Submit everything to the discipline of present reality”, for “we must first attend ‘violently’ to things as they are.... if we are to transcend the present” (Hall 1988A p14). This requires focusing upon “what is specific and different about this moment” (op cit p162). In a contemporary review of the significance of the New Left, Hall salutes their (and, of course, his own) recognition that “any prospect for the renewal of the Left had to begin with a new conception of socialism and a radically new analysis of....social relations” (Hall 1989A p23). Both then and now, the politics of the future could only take root in “the contradictory, stony ground of the present conjuncture” (Hall 1989C p151; for more on the New Left and its historically-specific approach see Hall 1989A p23-27,36-37; Hall 1989B p133-134; Hall 1989C p151-155).

We need to be aware of the theoretical sleight of hand Hall is undertaking here. To say ‘how things are now’ is not simply a task of paying ‘violent’ attention. It can only involve a sustained effort of theoretical clarification for, as Hall’s own re-reading of Marx’s treatment of ideology demonstrated, the ‘real relations’ can bear multiple representations, any ideology (elite or popular) being an articulation on, not a simple reflection of, the real. This alternative to economic reductionism further implies that the theoretical adequacy of any ideology or perspective cannot rest on its ‘violent attention’ to the current conjuncture, for there is no direct, quasi-empiricist relay of thought to reality such as Hall invokes here (see Hall 1983A p71-76 and Hall 1988B p41-44 for this argument). In his earlier adjudication of the Althusser – EP Thompson debate, Hall repeatedly denied the validity of empiricist claims for knowledge, arguing that theoretical abstraction and the movement between its different levels held the key to reproducing ‘the concrete in thought’ (Hall 1981A p382-384; Hall 1980B p67-68).

When we then epistemologically restore the moment of theory to the production of knowledge in place of Hall's empiricist foreshortening, a new set of questions emerge. Has Hall offered a substantial sociological analysis of 'the new' on which to base his calls for renewal? Are there any empirical analyses either undertaken by him, or theoretically enlisted to the cause, that confirm the new disposition of social relations and processes he invokes as the new ground for Left theory and practice? There are good reasons to doubt. In the case of Thatcherism Hall has not provided either to bolster his claims on its political effectiveness vis-à-vis 'the popular' or the contours of the new social reality it moves within. His pleadings to 'attend violently' to the 'specific and different' aspects of the conjuncture are fatally unsupported in the body of Hall's work. As for *Policing The Crisis*, a similar lack of empirical substantiation occurs in relation to its political conclusion on black crime (mugging) as a racially divisive factor, preventing the unification of black and white labour. Likewise, the youth sub-cultures engaging in *Resistance Through Rituals* are never empirically investigated to determine their empirical scope and size. These marginal though flamboyant class fractions receive lavish theoretical attention, whilst the cultural practices of the substantial body of their parental classes remain absent (3).

By way of conclusion then, we can see that far greater theoretical and political discrimination needs to be deployed in the face of novel social and cultural phenomena than Hall displays. It is crucial to address the continuities and transformations evident at the organic, structural level of class relations, to avoid becoming fixated on conjunctural novelties and ascribing to them unrealistic political significance. Without this return to the 'organic' an uncritical embracing of all that is new could lead the Left in all manner of

directions, not all (or even any) relevant to socialism. The political chasing after currently popular pastimes and values undertaken by Marxism Today in its 'New Times' analysis – focusing upon consumption, pleasure, etc – is a salutary warning, one to which I will return to subsequently. In the end the core principle of the continual articulation of theory and history, to which Hall's passion for historical specificity is intimately related, is too indeterminate to secure theoretical and political relevance. As we shall see, this does not stop Hall from repeatedly claiming it as essential to make socialism a political practice 'relevant' to current realities.

## **Gramsci's Alternative**

Hall has invoked Gramsci's example of analysing the particular features of Italian capitalism in his polemics on historical specificity directed against the traditionalist Left and its dogmatic adherence to fixed positions. However if we look at the precise contours of Gramsci's work, a rather different approach to historically specific theory and practice is found. To show this I will here briefly consider the full range of Gramsci's oeuvre, including those from the period when he was leader of the PCI and engaged in formulating a strategy designed to master the specificities of the conjuncture as an immediate, urgent, practical task, rather than consider only the Prison Notebooks as Hall does.

There is no doubting the centrality of historical specificity as a guiding principle of Gramsci's output. Throughout his career from journalist to revolutionary activist and then imprisoned theorist, this theme resounds at the levels of political strategy, historical

analysis and theoretical formulation. In his earliest works, the distinctive contours of Italian capitalism begin to be addressed, with the existing industrial democratic organs of the internal commissions based in Northern factories being singled out as suitable for adapting in the manner of Lenin's soviets during the Factory Council Movement. These historically particular forms could thus provide a platform on which to build socialist society in different conditions to those of Russia 1917 (Gramsci 1977 p41,65-66,76-77,100,147-149,167-168; Cammett 1967).

By the start of the 1920s Gramsci was heavily involved in internal PCI debates on how to strategically master the particular configuration of Italian capitalism in relation to the priorities laid down by the Comintern. As part of this he developed a distinctive analysis of the social formation in terms of its historically-specific trajectory, one culminating in the contemporary defeat of the Factory Council movement and the rise of Fascism.

According to Gramsci it was the limited nature of bourgeois hegemony established during the Risorgimento that produced a distinctive form of capitalism with its weakened social order and political superstructure. The results of this were seen in an enduring large agricultural sector with a preponderant peasantry centred in the South of the country, and prone to a type of 'colonial' exploitation by the North. At the political level there emerged a series of unstable alliances between industrial and rural bourgeoisies that relied on compromises and the cooptation of any social challenges from below. Ideologically there still remained a strong Catholic presence that cemented together the ruling bloc of forces in the South, and whose hold over the peasantry acted as a brake upon its radicalisation and potential revolutionary unification with the Northern proletariat. Such a social formation

was exceptionally prone to social crisis and marked by continual revolts of its subordinate forces. Its brittleness was ultimately laid bare and destroyed by the impact of the 1914-18 war, creating a crisis of power. After the failure of the revolutionary forces to achieve a breakthrough (in which Gramsci and the Factory Council movement played a central role) there emerged a new force from the Right, the Fascists, who succeeded in attaining state power and ruling the nation primarily through the modality of force (Gramsci 1978 p255-257,267-270,343-350).

Facing this particular and peculiar configuration of social relations and forces, Gramsci successfully reoriented the PCI towards a strategy aiming to master the 'specificities of the conjuncture'. This required a multifaceted approach active at economic, political and cultural levels to forge a new historic bloc centred upon an alliance of proletariat and peasantry. A key concern here was to detach the peasantry from its subordinate position within the ruling Southern bloc. To this end, efforts were made to encourage the formation of its own independent organisations (committees along the lines of the Factory Councils) and extensive ideological campaigns launched to highlight their common goals with the proletariat, counteracting the hold of divisive religious ideologies over them (Gramsci 1978 p253-254,354-356,422-423,442-462).

It is this strategic reorientation that recurs in the Prison Notebooks in a more abstract guise as Gramsci restages his battle within the PCI to secure a party line compatible with the historical specificities of Italian capitalism. His master concept of hegemony insistently pointed in the direction of the 'complexity of the concrete', the particular combination of objective and subjective forces that constituted the uniqueness of each national capitalism

and one to be mastered for any effective politics to be launched. Furthermore there were distinctive features of capitalist social formations, centring on the emergence of civil society and its characteristic rule by consent, that precluded any universalistic Marxist theory and practice, seeking to re-enact 1917 in wholly dissimilar circumstances. A third concern was with the issue of the 'national-popular', the failure of the bourgeoisie to unify the nation and create a national culture and collective will, bequeathing a fragile political order lacking genuine consent. The task of national unification now fell to the socialist revolution, unifying proletariat and peasantry into a national-popular force that encompasses both intellectual and masses. It must found a new modern state and civilisation under the organising and coordinating impulse provided by the revolutionary party (Gramsci 1971 p130-133,204,232-243,392-395).

What we have here in the case of Gramsci, is a very different appreciation of the principle of historical specificity to that of Hall. For Gramsci the principle is used theoretically to identify the key structural forces capable of effecting social change in a divided social formation (workers and peasants) and then practically mobilising to achieve their unification through the mediums of political and cultural organisation, coordinated by the revolutionary party. Hall's position is one of a detached academic pointing out socially visible conjunctural practices and phenomena undertaken by fractions of subordinate classes, and then rewriting existing Left positions to accommodate and validate these as 'political' or at least politically significant. This version neglects the role of core structural forces and their strategic powers, ending up reorienting Marxism away from its classical social constituencies and programmes.



Gramsci also gives us a different and far more satisfactory approach to the ‘accidental’ or ‘occasional’ features Hall embraces. He too noted the existence of visible conjunctural practices engaged in by subordinate class forces – the potential for banditry and adventurism found within the Italian peasantry (Gramsci 1977 p147-149,167-168). But he did not see such activity as central to the peasant cause, understanding it as a barrier to the task of building a revolutionary proletarian – peasant alliance, which remained the pre-eminent aim. Analogously Hall should have dismissed the ‘revolt of the black wageless’ expressed in mugging and focused his attention on how to unite black and white labour. Instead he weakly concluded that the presence of black crime entailed racial division and class segmentation, forcing a strategic rethink to accommodate such ‘proto-political’ activity. These spectacular events of the conjuncture are fatally overdrawn and politically damaging in Hall’s interpretation of historically-specific analysis. And to repeat an earlier point, there was no empirical evidence supplied by Hall that black mugging was actually dividing black and white labour – he simply and unwarrantedly assumed this. (4)

In the end it is the greater unity of theory and practice Gramsci’s work incarnates that regulates the notions of historical particularity and the constitution of the concrete more successfully. He is able to hold structure and conjuncture in far better balance than his academic descendant’s uncritical embrace of the spectacular phenomena of the latter, and preserve a keener strategic focus upon the primary tasks to be mastered in practice. Hall’s writings, in contrast, show a serious lack of political controls, despite his self-conception of CCCS practice as a modern day ‘organic intellectual’. I will investigate this last point at length in Chapter 10.

## **The Articulation of Theory and History**

Hall's commitment to historical specificity extends to his notion of theory as an evolving, mobile practice. Rejecting Althusser's attempt to create a scientific, closed version of Marxism, universally applicable, Hall stresses the continual changes and developments it must undergo if it is to respond effectively to an evolving social environment, where novel social and discursive phenomena are endlessly generated. These in turn, then force a recasting of theoretical frameworks to encompass the particular contours of the conjuncture under investigation, producing the required 'concrete analysis of concrete situations'. It is the dynamic nature of the object of Marxist analysis that implies such a constant conceptual updating (5).

From this perspective Hall has provided us with 'materialist' accounts of the development of Cultural Studies as a discipline, major theoretical shifts in the oeuvre of Marx, and in his own intellectual trajectory. Theory is a 'doubly articulated' cultural form, ever open to new horizons and resolutely 'without guarantees', a conception he saw as closer to Marx's mode of critical practice than any dogmatic construction of abstract orthodoxies. This position has itself then become highly influential in the domain of cultural studies as a template for reflexive accounts of its own development, undertaken recurrently by Hall and many others. What I want to address here are some peculiar problems such a perspective

throws up and the insufficiencies at the levels of theory and practice it embodies for a 'living Marxism'.

We can at least applaud Hall for attempting to restore the external, material determinants of theoretical production in the face of Althusser's idealist version of Marxism, and for insisting that theory is not a fixed schema but an evolving entity, reacting and reforming in relation to its social environment. Some of the examples he has given of this, for instance Marx's response to the defeats of 1848, Cultural Studies appropriation of Western Marxism after 1968, are persuasive. Having said that, there are deep-lying and fundamental weaknesses contained in Hall's approach, revolving around the degrees of indeterminacy and fluidity it exhibits.

One example of this is seen in his view of the nature of the theoretical elements that are borrowed and re-worked in the necessary process of 'constant conceptual updating'. Hall insists that a theoretical response to novel discursive elements does not simply involve transferring pre-existing, given entities. It redefines these elements through their relocation in a new and conceptually determining wider theoretical ensemble. Given that, then there are very few barriers to the scope for theoretical development and 'constant conceptual updating' existing internally in the theoretical realm, securing the mobility and fluidity Hall seeks.

As I suggested previously, this whole notion of indeterminate cultural elements and their degree of malleability and 'rearticulation' rests ultimately upon the Structuralist premise of an arbitrary relationship between sign and referent, with the meaning of any sign being

conferred by its position in the larger cultural formations of which it is a part. I think this has been a profoundly damaging and destabilising influence on the Left in general, licensing a shift away from its core concerns to an orientation that seeks to connect with and transform ('rearticulate') all manner of novel theoretical and popular cultural elements or forms, in the misguided belief of their potential appropriateness for Marxist theory and practice.

Quite what to replace such a view of the nature of cultural formations and language with is an issue beyond my competence and scope here. I will however return to its damaging impact upon Hall's political strategy vis-à-vis 'the popular' later on. Suffice to say that if Hall wanted to provide a materialist alternative approach to analysing theoretical production from that of Althusser, his 'double articulation' model contains its own, equally disabling idealism in its treatment of cultural elements as indeterminate entities, one he borrowed, in turn, from Laclau.

As for the larger vision of theoretical change and development Hall offers, his many narratives on the trajectory of Cultural Studies and his own, wider intellectual journey illustrate some grave problems involved in the core notion of 'articulation'.

If we look at those on cultural studies first there are substantial shifts in perspective evident in Hall's more recent narratives of its development from those first laid down at the end of his CCCS period, ones occluded by his continuing commitment to its 'double articulation' as a cultural form.

The earlier versions identified the core theoretical concern of Cultural Studies to develop a "non-reductionist theory of cultures and social formations", combining materialist, anti-

reductionist and historically-specific tropes (Hall 1980A p39). Against this bedrock of an 'open Marxism' different theoretical positions could be assessed, selectively appropriated or rejected (the latter option being taken in relation to Discourse Theory, psychoanalysis and Foucault). By the 1990s however the ostensibly similar framework of 'double articulation' contains a very different theoretical adjudicator, the variable articulation of culture and power, as guiding light of the discipline (contrast Hall 1980A and 1980B with Hall 1996D p395-396; Hall 1996E p287; Hall 1997B p24-25). Whilst this preserves the notion of doubly articulated cultural forms, we are not here working with anything like the same model of the external social environment for theory to engage with. An indeterminate notion of 'power' and its proliferation across many social sites that remains seriously under-theorised here displaces previous concerns for class relations as a social foundation. To this altered environment previously rejected positions are now redeployed as theoretical guides to apparently increasingly complex processes of cultural representation and temporary identities. More favourable treatments are now given to psychoanalysis, Foucault and Derrida in Hall's recent works, apparently in defiance of their universalistic and anti-materialist tendencies that once led him (quite rightly) to dismiss them (see for example Hall 1989G, 1993B, 1996H, 1996J, 1996K).

Parallel to this shift Hall announces a new political agenda, one revolving around strategies of 'contesting traditional roles' in relation to sexuality and subjectivity, 'negotiating tensions between similarity and difference' and 'resisting exclusion from the national culture of the community' (Hall 1996D p407-408; Hall 1990A p22). These concerns now supplant Classical Marxist strategies of revolution and social transformation previously adhered to, offering instead only a minimalist and imprecise 'cultural politics' behind their

common vocabulary of mobilising theory on the terrain of political practice, through the specific activity of the ‘organic intellectual’ (on this particular ‘articulation’ contrast Hall 1980A p45-46 with Hall 1990A p17-18, Hall 1996B p263-264,267-268).

What we are seeing here is a fundamental rewriting of the theoretical boundaries and political goals of Cultural Studies as a discipline (its ‘rearticulation’) in the light of Hall’s current post-Marxist perspective (or theoretical articulation). This however is masked by his continuing focus upon its ‘double articulation’. Not only that, this current position then becomes a perspective from which the historical narrative of the discipline is rewritten, at significant cost to its actual course and the previous theoretical and political positions established. This is most apparent in Hall’s recent comments on the role of Marxism in the trajectory of CCCS:-

“There never was a prior moment when cultural studies and Marxism represented a perfect fit....the encounter between British cultural studies and Marxism has first to be understood as the engagement with a problem.....It begins, and develops through the critique of a certain reductionism and economism, which I think is not extrinsic but intrinsic to Marxism” (Hall 1996B p265).

Such comments are obviously diametrically opposed to the aims of his renewal of Marxism and its elaboration of ‘a non-reductionist theory of cultures and social formations’ we have recounted at length here. This ‘rewriting of the past from the standpoint of the present’ was noted earlier on, in relation to Hall’s shifting dispositions towards the Marxist tradition and his misleading notion of a ‘continuing conversation’. Here it is also being downgraded as a foundational moment in the development of CCCS and the discipline of Cultural Studies, in the name of the core principle of the continual (re)articulation of theory and history (6).

It seems to me that this whole idea of ‘rearticulating theory in the light of historical developments’ is radically insufficient as a guide to grasping the contours of the development of elite cultural forms (both individual and collective movements). In terms of Hall’s own career, it leads to a distorted presentation of his relationship with Marxism and its central role in his works of the 1970s and 1980s. He presents the fluidity of theorising as “an open horizon, moving within the magnetic field of some basic concepts but constantly being applied afresh to what is genuinely original and novel” (Hall 1996A p138). However the constituent core concepts of this position are never spelled out by Hall, who concentrates instead on the theoretical movement and fluidity demanded by historical developments, and the re-viewing of past positions solely from the standpoint of his current conceptual and political preferences. We lose sight here of the (temporary) foundational role Marxism played for both Cultural Studies and Hall’s intellectual career in favour of the flux of theoretical change. At root there seems a fatal indeterminacy within the principle of theory as (re)articulation, producing a dissolution of theoretical positions within the continual flow of historical development and failing to establish that ‘magnetic core’ of basic concepts Hall claims to rely upon. Ironically, we lack sufficient sense of historical specificity or theoretical differentiation to be able to recount the historical course of Hall’s intellectual journey.

An alternative approach would be to abandon the notion of ‘theory as articulation’ and draw upon the work of some of the contributors to the Gilroy et al collection of articles about Hall, and especially that of Francis Mulhern in order to periodise Hall’s career in general. I mentioned this earlier on when identifying the tripartite trajectory of Hall’s

career, beginning with the 'humanist Marxist' period of the New Left, followed by the 'complex Marxism' of the 1970s and 80s and then a 'post-Marxist' position occupied since the 1990s.

Alongside this theoretical change there has been a continual adherence to a set of 'magnetic core' concerns that these commentators have begun to address. Of these Mulhern provides us with the most complete reading so far, and we can rewrite the themes of 'cultural politics', 'the conjunctural', and 'the contingent', he discusses in terms of the four basic concerns we have used to structure our more limited investigation of Hall's complex Marxism :-

- 1) historical specificity (conjunctural analysis and anti-universalism)
- 2) the open-endedness of history (contingency and anti-determinism)
- 3) culture as a constitutive force (critique of economic reductionism)
- 4) the politics of intellectual work (critique of academicism)

Mulhern tends to see Marxism as a continuous thread running throughout Hall's career, as is evident in his treatment of the post-Marxist 'New Times' and 'New Ethnicities' works and his failure to delimit the general discussion of Hall-Marxism (see Mulhern 2000 p114-124 and 125-131 respectively). I have shown here that there is instead a definite shape and movement in the Hall – Marxism relation. However the core concerns he isolates can usefully be seen as the 'magnetic core' Hall relies on throughout his intellectual odyssey, principles which are 'operationalised' in each of the three distinct theoretical and political positions he adopts as definite and foundational moments of stasis. From such a perspective we are better able to grasp the mixture of continuities and change in Hall's output than if we rely on his own self-conception of 'theory articulated with history'.



## Conclusions

Stuart Hall promised that the renewal of Marxism as a living body of theory and practice depended upon its ability to provide a ‘concrete analysis of concrete situations’ and then develop an appropriate strategic response. This principle was in turn governed by the dynamic nature of the object confronting Marxism, the continual development of the capitalist mode of production. From this also flowed a requirement for on-going theoretical work to engage with its mobile social environment.

What we have seen here falls some way short of that promise. In Hall’s hands the principle of historical specificity has led us to a series of incomplete analyses of society, culture and politics. There has been a recurring one-sided analysis of ‘concrete situations’, overplaying the role of novel, conjunctural features at the expense of any detailed consideration of those organic structural relations that characterise the social formation. Accompanying this flimsy sociology has been a political-strategic impasse created by Hall’s incorporation of so-called ‘politically significant’ social forces and phenomena into Left political practice. He has abandoned its traditional perspectives but does he offer any fully-fledged alternative? A third feature to note is his failure to analyse elite cultural formations and their development from the position of their continual rearticulation of theory and history.

This ignored their enduring continuities and the extent of their external determinants due to a fatal belief in the indeterminacy and malleability of their constituent elements.

Hall may be right in insisting on the need for a 'concrete analysis of concrete situations' as a basis for Marxist politics, and on the continual mobility of capitalism as a mode of production. Beyond that however, his attempts to respond to these needs and external constraints are unconvincing. We need a far more balanced approach to the 'concrete situation', reintegrating its organic and structural dimensions along the lines offered by Gramsci, instead of becoming fixated upon the spectacular features of 'the conjunctural'. As for the continual development of capitalism, this bare feature does not tell us how to respond to its changing configurations and novel developments, despite Hall's empiricist injunctions to 'attend violently to the new', as if this would automatically guarantee a correct analysis. For as we know all too well by now, a renewed Marxism must be one resolutely 'without guarantees'!!

Many of these issues relate to the core principle of the 'articulation of theory and history' and its indeterminate nature. There is here an insufficient degree of political and theoretical discrimination to allow Hall to build on his correct concern for a concretely oriented Marxism. Upon its basis he has been unable to distinguish between the sociologically central and those marginal social forces and phenomena he invests so much hope in, at great political cost. In addition, this principle has proved theoretically unable to examine the contours of intellectual development and elite cultural formations with their trajectories of continuity and change. Both theoretically and politically, Marxism cannot afford to be a universalism, as Hall rightly shows, and the historical record amply demonstrates. But as Hall's own alternative also shows, it cannot be a 'conjuncturalism' either.

## Notes

1. This raises the issue of the nature of contemporary capitalism, its direction, and especially the impact of processes of 'globalisation' upon it. My critique of Hall's reliance on 'post-Fordist' political economy does not rule out the existence of other social trajectories and dynamics that are reshaping the current configuration of capital on a global scale, to an extent that is the subject of extensive critical debate. For a summary of the different perspectives held here, see Callinicos 2003 p15-43. On the role of 'globalisation' as a project launched by the US ruling class, see Gowan 1999. And on the relationship of 'globalisation' to a burgeoning internationalised working class, see Harman 2002.
2. Though many other commentators have recognised Hall's commitment to 'the new' and 'the present conjuncture', they do not seem to see any problems flowing from his particular attempts to incorporate this into Left theory and practice. See for example the contributions of Gail Lewis, Angela McRobbie and David Scott in Gilroy et al eds 2000 p195, 216 and 283 respectively; and also the editorial introduction to Morley and Chen eds 1996 p4.
3. Having said that, my feeling is that at least the structural context in which these cultural practices of mugging and sub-cultural revolt were played out was more thoroughly addressed in these works than is the case in the Thatcherism analysis.
4. The empirically-led examination of the divisions and commonalities found between black and white workers in Britain undertaken by Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea are therefore far more reliable in estimating the political potential for their unification than Hall's suppositions. See Phizacklea and Miles 1979; Phizacklea and Miles 1980; Miles 1982; Miles and Phizacklea 1984.
5. A further point bearing on this perspective is the degree of selectivity at work in Hall's ostensibly 'open-ended' commitments. Certain novel discursive elements of the given conjuncture are not given any consideration at all, despite their proximity to Hall's goal of renewing Marxism along anti-reductionist lines. Such a fate befell the realist paradigm on social science (elaborated by the likes of Roy Bhaskar, Andrew Collier, et al). By way of contrast other, non-Marxist positions (Foucault) or post-Marxist writers (such as Laclau and Mouffe) are accorded extensive hearings at the court of historical specificity, whatever their actual distance from Hall's stated project of founding a 'Marxism without Guarantees'.
6. It has been suggested to me that Hall's approach here is akin to the very nature of history as a discipline, continually rewriting the past from the perspective of the present and its current, guiding preoccupations – and, as such unobjectionable. However what we have seen here is not just a new theoretical perspective (post-Marxist) used to understand intellectual developments and revising earlier estimations of the utility of Marxism. It also involves a serious distortion of the scale of past allegiances and their substantial role in guiding the large body of intellectual work we have been concerned with.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONTINGENCY AND DETERMINISM**

In recasting Marxism as a living body of theory and practice that was ‘without Guarantees’ Hall was attempting to conceptualise his career – long rejection of determinism in favour of a more open-ended and fluid perspective on historical and social processes and their outcomes. Right from his earliest New Left days, he had consistently avoided traditional Marxist perspectives on ‘economic breakdown’ or ‘the maturing systemic contradiction between forces and relations of production’ as sufficient causal factors to explain contemporary political forms, struggles and their outcomes. Nor had he ever had recourse to abiding beliefs in the long – run progressive march of history, guaranteeing the triumph of revolution. Instead his concern was with securing a space both analytically and strategically for the creative role of human agency and its determining hold over the future shape of social relations, a passion he shared with all New Left writers and a defining mark of their ‘socialist humanism’.

This view colours all of Hall’s ‘complex Marxist’ works. In the initial critical encounter with Althusserianism, he defended Marx’s stress on the role of class struggle in explaining the shape of social structures and their transformations, in opposition to its structuralist-determinism (Hall 1974A). That Hall simultaneously endorsed the Structuralist critique of humanist visions of unmediated and foundational human agency in favour of their unconscious, social formation was not seen at the time as in any way a problematic ‘selective appropriation’, a point I will return to below. Similarly when retrieving Marx’s

mature perspectives on the character of the social formation and its processes of class formation, he highlighted the decisive impact that collective agents and their political representatives had on the resolution of social crises in nineteenth century France, and even on the seismic shift between different stages in the development of the capitalist mode of production. Class struggle is not determined in a strong sense by long-range historical processes here. They provide only the 'objective conditions' within which a whole range of political projects and resolutions can be launched. It is the moment of creative agency that is decisive in Hall's view. Politics, not economics, is in command.

In his own concrete studies undertaken when at CCCS Hall illustrated such a position, showing the range of active interventions made by creative human agency in the historical trajectory of post-war Britain. He traced a dialectic of 'repertoires of resistance' and social reaction visible in the cultural and political challenges posed by the youth sub-cultures of working and middle classes, the revolt of the black wage-less and the dual response by dominant classes and cultural forces aiming to restore social authority and hegemony through consensual and coercive means. The structural backdrop to this political theatre was taken to be the limited transformation of capitalist production that characterised British capitalism and its increasingly crisis-ridden economy.

When we reach the analyses of Thatcherism Hall emphasised even more the power of human agency to determine the character of social relations and historical outcomes. The social crisis of the late 1970s had been politically mastered not by the forces assumed to be the 'natural' heirs of capitalist economic breakdown (the Left) but instead, by a resurgent right-wing project able to capitalise strategically upon the particular combination of objective and subjective forces and processes through a series of wide ranging cultural and

political interventions and struggles. Thatcherism vividly demonstrated to the Left the fatal weakness in its adherence to scenarios of structural determinism or economic crisis guaranteeing its historical triumph. There were in fact no 'guarantees' available for the Left to rely on. Therefore it could only reconstruct itself accordingly in the name of a renewed 'Marxism without Guarantees'. In this, Hall suggested he was working in the spirit of Gramsci, who similarly confronted an earlier time of social crisis leading to a victory for the Right, not the Left in post-war Italy, thence turning his attention ever further towards the importance of political and cultural intervention. As he put it, the economic is now only determining in 'the first instance', establishing only the contours of the concrete relations that political activity must be directed at. It cannot specify the forms of political and ideological struggle collective agents undertake, or the nature of their outcomes.

To assess this anti-determinist position we can begin by considering the general perspective on social and historical processes Hall advocates, before going on to examine the theoretical and political status of that creative human agency he has insisted upon.

## The Open-Endedness of History

Hall's most sustained arguments against determinism and on the 'open horizon' of history occurred in his analyses of Thatcherism, where he recruited Gramsci's perspective on the nature of social crises and their variable outcomes as an historic guide to the contingent quality of social and historical processes. He insisted there is always a gap between the objective conditions found in any concrete situation and its political outcomes, one that is variously bridged by the character of the strategies launched by rival forces to master its particular combination of active elements. This historical terrain remains open-ended, a field of political possibility for collective agencies to address. Politics is an active *production* of forms of power.

Now taken at the most general level, and read in relation to the history of Left politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hall's repudiation of structural determinism and historical necessity is certainly valid enough. To mention only his own favourite examples of post-1918 Italy and the Bolsheviks in 1917, there seems no disputing the need for a political awareness of objective conditions being determinant in the 'first instance' only, and its consequence of developing an appropriate strategic intervention attuned to the particulars of the given 'concrete situation'. Where the problems begin for Hall are around the issues of the scope afforded to the determining power of human agency, his one-dimensional notion of social

structures and the specific forms and social collectivities identified as strategically relevant. I will concentrate here on the first two of these, postponing the last to later investigation.

The treatment of Thatcherism Hall developed in the light of this anti-determinist stance is one characterised by a distinctive (not to say peculiar, as an analysis 'from the Left') appreciation of its instinctive grasp of the scope for political intervention in a time of social crisis. Time and again we are told how this master of hegemonic politics 'grasped the nettle' and successfully intervened across the varied terrains of popular ideologies, elite political formations, and the multiplying array of social antagonisms found in civil society, to create a new consensus and complex social base for itself. In so doing, it produced a singular resolution to the profound crisis of hegemony facing British society. It saw the crisis not as an inert objective structure but an open field of force, wherein formative efforts could be undertaken to found a new settlement and balance of political forces, an historic opportunity which it keenly grasped. It then set out to destroy the existing social-democratic order in favour of its own 'free market strong state' alternative once assuming state power, continuing to politically and culturally intervene so as to secure popular support for, and the 'historic bloc' of forces behind, its project.

Such a vision of Thatcherism as an anti-determinist master of hegemonic politics is not without its problems, as many other critics have pointed out. In prioritising the activist side of political practice, Hall was guilty of seriously underplaying the role of those objective conditions and determinants that continued to operate upon the political terrain, not least of which is that of class structure, and its relations of power and interest. There were definite



material and structural constraints limiting the political room for manoeuvre open to Thatcherism, ones Hall's exaggeration of its powers (as theory apparently effortlessly translated into practice) neglected. Let us consider this further, in relation to two alternative perspectives which illustrate the superiority of a contextualised approach to political analysis. A concrete example of this difference is also given in the next chapter, where the relationship of Thatcherism to the 1984-85 Miners' Strike is considered.

More traditional Marxist accounts of Thatcherism kept this context firmly to the fore. Facing a generalised economic crisis, strong defensive working-class organisation and the failure of hitherto dominant Keynesian strategies, an alternative capitalist solution of free market economics imposed by a strong state was implemented across the board in the leading capitalist nations during the 1980s and subsequently. Thatcherism as 'class struggle from above' (Ralph Miliband) was a determined project, not a 'free choice' immune from the current economic and political situation (on which see Miliband 1985; Phillips 1988 p22; Richards and Freeman 1988 p90-93; Gamble 1988 p187-194). This material context – the powers, interests and institutions comprising the 'infrastructure' of hegemonic politics – led Thatcherism to pursue the restoration of capitalist class power and rationalise its productive base through a characteristic policy mix of monetarism, public sector cuts, privatisation, mass unemployment and anti-union legislation (see Sutcliffe 1983; Gamble 1985; Glyn and Harrison 1980). Hall's anti-deterministic vision tends to lose sight all too often of the vital links (or 'articulation') between the realms of politics and their material and institutional bases, one reflected in the relative absence of the above policies in his narrative. (1)

Hall's most sustained effort to relate Thatcherism to its structural context lay in his later treatment of its economic strategy as one of 'internationalisation' rather than a national renewal of the British economy (2). Even here however he failed to fully connect its political project to the social landscape of 'uneven modernisation', deindustrialisation and social protests it is helping to create. As Jessop et al argued, such a shift required increased state repression of the 'second nation' left behind by this strategy. The increasingly authoritarian face of Thatcherism in government therefore derived from the demands of the context it operated within, and not due to any failures at the level of ideological consent as Hall supposed (Jessop et al 1988 p88-89; Hall 1988A p83-84,155).

The alternative interpretation of Thatcherism offered by Jessop et al foregrounds this wider context of its operations, in particular the institutional and organisational barriers it faced in both state and civil society. By the 1970s Jessop et al argued there existed a profound structural blockage in the political realm in British society – a 'dual crisis of the British state' – which prevented effective political representation being achieved through either parliamentary or corporatist channels. In response to this, Thatcherism resorted to a populist politics and an increasingly centralised drive to disengage government from social and economic provision. Both its populism and authoritarianism thus have a material, structural base (Jessop et al 1988 p80-3,91,111,117).

Despite this Jessop et al suggested such a strategy of disengagement had only limited success, with no coherent and comprehensive restructuring of state – civil society relations being achieved, and significant opposition emerging (op cit p91,112,115-121; for more on this point see Gamble 1988 p115,123-138,231-235). Hall's failure to address these material

and structural barriers to the political practice of Thatcherism thereby significantly contributed to his over-estimation of it as a political force (3).

The end-result of Hall's anti-deterministic perspective has thus been a voluntarist reading of Thatcherism as an hegemonic political force successfully redrawing contemporary social, cultural and economic relations in accordance with its own project of 'free market strong state', an extremely potent 'authoritarian populism'. What we have shown here is that a more balanced view of political forces depends upon a thorough contextualisation of its practices and strategies being undertaken theoretically from the outset. This needn't mean a capitulation to a discredited structural determinism, expunging all trace of creative agency and political effectiveness. It simply means the parameters of hegemonic politics involve more than the question of ideological consent Hall focuses upon in praise of the interventionist impulses of Thatcherism. We will return to this later. Here we can end by quoting Francis Mulhern's accurate commentary on Hall's prioritisation of contingency:-

"The contingent is what is neither necessary nor impossible. It is one of the basic philosophical assumptions from which historical analysis sets out, not a meaningful guide to any particular substantive conclusion. It specifies what is surely crucial in any given concrete situation, namely, its discoverable order of probabilities" (Mulhern 2000 p129).

Mulhern made this point in relation to Hall's concern to endorse the creativity of popular culture both theoretically and politically, on which a whole mini-industry of cultural studies has now been built. Here his affinity with the contingent has been shown to be equally damaging in relation to estimating the powers and weak-spots of contemporary political opponents. As Jessop et al recognised, on Hall's reading Thatcherism appeared as an all-conquering political juggernaut, before which the Left was helpless to resist. Furthermore

this failure to theoretically establish the ‘discoverable order of probabilities’ had far greater strategic consequences, as we shall see.

## 2

### **The Role of Agency**

Hall’s long-standing commitment to the historical role of creative human agency in determining social processes and the shape of social relations underwent a particular and peculiar transformation in his attempt to produce a ‘complex Marxism’. The starting point of a selective appropriation of Althusserianism (established in his reading of Marx’s 1857 Introduction) opposed its structural–determinist views of social structure and social transformation, reinstating the role of class struggle and a ‘dialectic of objective and subjective forces’ underpinning historical development (see the critique of Godelier, an Althusserian affiliate, in Hall 1974A p162).

However at the same time, Hall was wholeheartedly in favour of the Structuralist critique of humanism and its ‘myth’ of unconditioned and foundational human agency, one pointing towards the unconscious formulation of social subjects through cultural and social systems (see Hall 1980A p30-31; Hall 1980B p67; Hall 1981A p380). In the hands of Althusser this general perspective had led to his arguing for the formation of social subjects as ‘bearers’ of particular social structures, whose dominant values and behaviours are transmitted

through the formative institutions of the superstructures, the so-called ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’. Such a position would seem to exclude the possibility of class struggle and creative human agency Hall wanted to preserve within his ‘complex Marxism’. To explore this further and consider Hall’s response to such a dilemma, we need to locate his attempted selective appropriation of ‘theoretical anti-humanism’ within the larger debates over Althusserianism carried out in the circles of academic Marxism at the time. We will then be better able to assess the successes of his particular approach.

Now the Althusserian legacy was certainly not uniform. It included significantly different versions of the social formation (as an over-determined, historically complex and specific entity or self-reproducing whole operating under the sign of ‘structural causality’) and variable formulations on the nature of ideology (as abstract ‘systems of representation’ or, later, a set of concrete ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’). Hall wanted to incorporate some of these insights into his developing ‘complex Marxism’ (the themes of overdetermined social formations and socially constituted subjectivities) without accepting the more functionalist and apolitical dynamics of self-reproducing structures and its agents as compliant ‘bearers’ (see Hall 1980A p32-36; Hall 1980B p68-69; Hall 1981A p381).

From the perspective of others engaged in this debate who took a more critical stance as a whole to Althusser’s intervention, we can question how viable Hall’s partial borrowings are, in relation to his concern for preserving the decisive role of human agency and class struggle in social and historical outcomes. According to the readings of Althusserianism given by Axel Honneth and Jorge Larraín there is no possibility of reintegrating notions of

class struggle and concrete human agency within its anti-humanist bedrock. For this baseline presented the subject as an unconscious *product* of social structures, whose internal logics are realised in its instrumentalised action according to the common form of production that each constitutive social practice embodies (Honneth 1994 p75-76,88). This restrictive identification of human practice with instrumental action alone, one determined by the production of subjectivity through the combined efforts of the constitutive levels of the social formation (each of which exhibits this common 'ontology'), ultimately results in self-reproducing and self-transforming social structures. Class struggle, non-instrumental forms of human practice and conscious political transformation are impossible according to the logic of this 'problematic' (4).

That being so, Althusserianism is itself radically incapable of providing that 'concrete analysis of concrete situations' Hall seeks, that is of understanding the 'conjuncture' as anything more than a set of structural conditions, whose degree of realisation will always depend on the processes of class struggle here excluded (Honneth 1994 p93-100; Larrain 1986 p90-115). So, Hall's aim of restoring the role of class struggle alongside Althusser's anti-essentialist and anti-humanist perspectives on the character of social formations and their subjects is one that does not find any theoretical or political space within the framework of 'theoretical anti-humanism'. It is a deeply 'problematic' theoretical conjugation belying Hall's arguments on the indeterminacy and malleability of cultural elements (5).

An alternative to Hall's halting combination of class struggle and over-determined social formations has been formulated by others involved in debating the Althusserian legacy, redrawing the nature of the structure–subject relationship lying at the root of so many of its problems, and of its constitutive terms. In place of his visions of human agents as products of social structures and of the latter as constraints upon the former, a new, less restrictive and universalistic perspective emerges in the works of Alex Callinicos and Norman Geras.

A new notion of human agency has been formulated here, rejecting both its reduction to the status of an illusion or the alternative unconditioned humanist guise that featured in the Althusser – EP Thompson debate. Instead we need to grasp the dual determination of the subject by both social and natural processes, and link the possibility of human agency (of agents as conscious, intentional entities) to this natural ground. It is their capacities and needs as human beings which provide both the motives for, and the means of, acting beyond those governed by social structures, constituting an ineliminable force within the social realm (Callinicos 1989A p22-29; Geras 1983). Such a turn to a naturalistic version of Marxism resists the Althusserian direct transposition of structural logics into historical outcomes, offering one way to reintegrate concerns for human agency into historical and social analysis.

In terms of social structure an abandonment of Althusser's notion of their basis in a common 'ontology of practices', where humans are produced as instrumentalised labour (ruling out alternative ways of acting) is needed. To repeat, this is one operating both in relation to the vision of the social formation as self-reproducing structures and Hall's

favoured thesis of ‘overdetermination’. Structure itself needs to be rethought as a dualistic entity – both constraint upon and enabler of human action – thereby allowing historical and social processes to be theorised without relying on either of the existing alternatives of structural determinism or unconditioned agency (the unsatisfactory positions adopted by Althusser and EP Thompson respectively). We can now grasp the notion of structure as an active force in historical transformations, rather than simply an inert limit upon them. The ‘transformative capacity’ of human action depends upon their ‘causal powers’ (both natural and social in origin), with the latter resting upon the rules and resources present within social structures and instantiated in action (Callinicos 1989A p84-89, 235-239; Benton 1984). From here it is possible to revisit Hall’s favourite Althusserian analysis of 1917 as a ‘fusion’ of multiple social contradictions (where structural conditions and contingent factors sit side by side without being successfully integrated), showing what causal powers enabled the agents of revolution to bring about this historical result within a given structural matrix.

Sadly, neither of these options has been taken by Hall himself. On the issue of human agency he has remained committed to the Structuralist position of socially constituted subjectivity formed unconsciously through cultural systems of representation and classification. In his CCCS works of the 1970s he sought to avoid the functionalist and universalist implications of Althusser’s analysis of ideologies by attempting to relativise and differentiate this core social process, outlining the existence of a contested terrain of historically specific ideologies and subjectivities, that is always open to cultural and political intervention. For this the work of Poulantzas and especially Gramsci were



recruited as guides. This perspective can be seen in Hall's portrayals of a diverse terrain of cultural identities and subjects characterising post-war Britain, with its array of distinctive youth sub-cultures, differentiated media audiences and race-specific identities. What these works do not do however is formulate a coherent account of the human agent as an historical force in the wake of the Structuralist critique of humanist myths of 'Man' the creator. This was to prove extremely disabling for Hall in his later works of the 1980s.

As for social structure there is no indication that he has engaged with any of the work formulated by Marxist critics to move beyond the shortcomings of Althusserianism, and provide a persuasive reading of the role of structure in historical changes (6). What we keep finding is a unilateral stress on the inert limits structures exert over given concrete situations, though these limitations typically fade in to the background as his attention turns overwhelmingly to the range of political and cultural actions and strategies rival forces launch to master 'the conjuncture'. This combination of 'inert conditions and active struggles' fails to register the enabling role of structures and the causal powers derived from them deployed by agents 'making history'. Perhaps here lies the ultimate source of the shifting focus between structural processes and active resistance that critics such as Chris Rojek and Martin Barker have found in *Policing The Crisis*.

By the time we reach the 1980s, Hall's strained commitment to the role of human agency in social processes becomes further attenuated. In place of the diverse identities and subjectivities formed primarily through class relations characterising the CCCS works, Hall now endorsed the post-Structuralist vision of the individual subject as a fragmented and

dispersed entity. This is formed across a range of overlapping social identities and interests in increasingly complex social orders where a multitude of social antagonisms are operative, fracturing the old unified self and functioning more as an 'open space' that is fixed temporarily in a particular and provisional guise. This view was taken over from the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and used to demonstrate the degree of openness and malleability of social identities, one hegemonic political projects could contest and transform ('rearticulate') to build popular support, creating subjects in its own image.

However it is apparent that such a theoretical shift on Hall's part has not resolved any of his earlier problems. Indeed these are exacerbated insofar as this new, plural dispersed self seems to lack any coherent basis to make it the centre of deliberative agency Hall requires (see Wood 1986 p78; Hunter 1988 p886,894). Could such a fragile entity act politically to achieve social change? A far stronger notion of subjectivity is needed here, one provided by the post-Althusserian turn to naturalistic foundations discussed above. The Structuralist/post-Structuralist tradition Hall relies on has not offered any substantial or convincing account of the contours and capacities of human agency to match this (7).

In the words of Alex Callinicos:-

"...human beings ...are embodied agents, whose intentional activities flow from the capacities they possess and are intelligible in the light of the needs they share as members of the same natural species" (Callinicos 1989A p25).

They are centres, capable of initiating action rather than "bundles of drives and desires constructed within social relations" (op cit p36). Hall's affiliation to the Structuralist critique of human agency and its post-Structuralist progeny (including Laclau and Mouffe) has here left him unable theoretically to ground his political preferences and priorities.

## Gramsci and the Collective Will

Hall recruits theoretical support for his arguments on the role of contingency in human history and the nature of the subjects charged with ‘making history’ in the works of Gramsci. This is not an obvious or straightforward affiliation, however. If we contrast Gramsci’s remarks on these issues with Hall’s reading (one once again restricted to comments from the Prison Notebooks), a significant brake can be put on the identity of the two thinkers asserted by Hall. Furthermore, this reveals two characteristic features of his interpretation – namely the reliance upon the thought of Laclau and Mouffe in understanding and appropriating the Gramscian legacy, and the distance from any concrete political commitments and organisational imperatives Hall’s work displays (its lack of any unity of theory and practice).

In terms of the nature of the subject of political action, Hall presents Gramsci as a forerunner of the contemporary vision of a fractured and decentred entity put forward by post-Structuralism and its progeny, including Laclau and Mouffe (Hall 1988A p6-8,10,167,169; Hall 1988B p56; Hall 1980F p334-335; Hall 1996F p430-434). We have already discussed the severe limitations inherent in such a view of the subject as a potential agent of social transformation. What we need to recognise also is the distortion of Gramsci’s thought here in Hall’s re-reading of it through the lenses of Laclau and Mouffe,

one announced in the early attempt by Mouffe to recover (or invent?) a non-reductionist problematic found ‘in the practical state’ in Gramsci’s concept of hegemony (Mouffe 1981 p220, originally written in 1979).

Gramsci never subscribed to the notion of a plurality of social antagonisms taken to be ‘democratically equivalent’ as the foundation of the social formation – for him, the issue was one of class relations and alliances between oppressed classes in a divided Italy.

Similarly his views on the contradictoriness of common sense and popular consciousness were restricted to its duality of progressive and reactionary elements, entailing a strategy for developing the ‘good sense’ of the masses, and not one of an indeterminate array of interpellating discourses formed in relation to proliferating social antagonisms. In terms of the constituent forces of the political ‘collective will’ Gramsci is resolutely a class-based advocate and strategist. It is Laclau and Mouffe and Hall himself who are seeking to transform him into a precursor of their own, very different optic on hegemonic politics and their fragmentary subjects in the modern, plural social (8).

A second foundation for Hall’s anti-deterministic version of a ‘Marxism without Guarantees’ occurs in his recruitment of Gramsci’s views on political passivity, mechanical approaches to social and historical processes and the nature of social crises, contained in the Prison Notebooks. Here the picture is more complex. Undoubtedly Gramsci was a strong critic of deterministic versions of Marxism and of the political inactivity they licensed.

In his earliest writings he highlighted the necessity for active political intervention, to create a revolutionary collective will, rather than relying on dubious ‘logics of economic necessity’ as illustrated in the success of the Bolsheviks (a ‘Revolution against Capital’ and positivistic Marxism) and the temporary advances made by the Factory Council Movement in post-war Italy (see respectively Gramsci 1977 p34-37,50,52; Boggs 1984 p40-42,55-59 and Gramsci 1977 p75-77,98-100,109-110,171,176,191-195,265-268,336-338). Without the moment of creative human agency, the collective will propelling human history will remain dormant and unrealised. And in the Prison Notebooks Gramsci theoretically establishes this vision in terms of his master concept of hegemony, showing its appreciation of the multitude of constitutive forces involved in the processes of social transformations, and the decisive role of the ‘relations of force’ in the political sphere, in determining particular historical outcomes. The economic guarantees nothing, conscious human activity in the forms of political organisation and cultural intervention being the deciding factors (Gramsci 1971 p57-58,80,161-168,180-185,249,270-271). In the light of this any given social crisis could only be approached in terms of its underdetermination by ‘objective conditions’ and the potential for various resolutions depending upon the balance between the contending political forces and their given strategies (op cit p177-178,199,210-211,219-223,228-229,275-276).

These arguments are both familiar, in terms of the preceding exposition of Hall’s approach to Thatcherism, and well supported historically. Gramsci and Hall are surely right to delimit the hold exercised by ‘objective conditions’ over social and historical processes and transformations. Where they radically differ however is in terms of their contribution to our

understanding of how a 'collective will' can 'make history' and translate their common appreciation of the ineliminable role of contingency in human history into a concrete historical fact.

Gramsci's historical arguments on contingency and anti-determinism were intimately coupled with a set of concerns on the forms of concrete political organisation this could take in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy. During the 1920s he was engaged in a fierce series of debates with other factions of the newly formed PCI on precisely this issue of making, creating a revolutionary collective will in inhospitable historical conditions, where Fascism was dominant politically and acting to severely restrict (and ultimately abolish) the room for creative human agency on the Left.

Gramsci here combined a recognition of the need for a centralised and unified national party, able to lead and coordinate the forces of opposition, with a strategy of creative intervention amongst the masses, to develop their struggles and forms of consciousness towards revolutionary perspectives. The political party must be both an organisational and educative force, resisting elitism and intervening to create a new collective will, a strategy that ultimately led to his triumph over his rivals in the PCI (Bordiga and Tasca) and assumption of the leadership prior to imprisonment (Gramsci 1978 p138,154-156,166-168,185,189,195-200,225,235,240-241,251-254,264-272,360-372). These concerns recur in the later Prison Notebooks where Gramsci charts an approach to the decisive role played by 'the political' through a dual critique of syndicalist and elitist alternatives to his 'democratic centralist' model of political organisation, one uniting popular activity with centralised leadership (Gramsci 1971 p126-131,185-190,194,197-200, 211).

The case of Hall could not be more different. His concerns are not on the ‘forms of concrete political organisation’ undertaken by active forces in given historical conditions. Instead he offers a one-sided examination of the cultural strategies launched by one particular political project, namely Thatcherism, and the assumption of their decisive impact upon the terrains of popular common sense and the plurality of social antagonisms traversing civil society, in the light of its repeated electoral victories. This cultural focus leads to a serious over-exaggeration of its influence, failing to address other, non-cultural reasons for its electoral dominance, and an effective exclusion of any determinations or constraints active within the ‘conjuncture’ residing at the levels of social structure, economic context or material institutions and barriers. We end up with an over-weening voluntarism resulting from Hall’s initial (and correct) rejection of determinism. Instead of being determinant only in the ‘first instance’, it appears that the realm of ‘the economic’ has no significant impact at all over the terrains of politics and culture. The critiques of Hall’s dissociation of Thatcherism from the structural context of class relations mentioned earlier are directed at this gulf.

If we return to the example of Gramsci’s pre-prison writings, one clue to Hall’s equation of anti-determinism with *unregulated contingency* can be found. For whereas both acknowledge the key role of cultural intervention, ‘intellectual and moral reform’, in the creation of an effective collective will, Gramsci tied this strategy into a wider and more global approach to ‘making history’. He located this mode of struggle within a concrete political intervention undertaken by the party to engage with the daily life of the masses and transform all areas of society. In so doing, the realms of existing social structures,

institutional and organisational matrices, as well as economic contexts are massively present as structural limits (and opportunities) to political activity, including its strategies of cultural struggle.

Such a set of obstacles are notably absent from Hall's perspective. Here there are only practices of 'ideological articulation' discussed primarily in abstraction from their practical implementation, or presented as being launched through the channels of the media by Thatcherism and apparently conquering all-comers across the social arena. There appear few limits to the scope for such activity, such as would confront the Gramscian model of concrete political intervention. And it is here that Hall's over-estimation of the role of the contingent surely lies. The lack of any unity of theory and practice his work exhibits has encouraged an uncontrolled 'cultural politics' that drastically overplays the scope for cultural interventions and practices and recasts human history as a site for transformation via cultural struggles in an undetermined social world. He has been steered in this direction by the work of Laclau and Mouffe, who have redrawn a model of the social as a realm of pure contingency, where only hegemonic political articulations can temporarily fix its configuration, political regime and type of subjects. Whilst Hall has stated that he rejects this full-blooded discursive model and seeks to retain a sense of the material limitations to cultural interventions, his concrete analyses of Thatcherism reveal this apparently selective appropriation to be purely 'gestural' - see Hall 1988A p10,140,157 for such comments (9). A further discussion of this theme follows in Chapter 10.



## Conclusions

Hall's antipathy towards deterministic versions of Marxism and their range of theoretical and political problems is a valid position to start from for those concerned with the renewal of Marxism as a living body of thought and action. What follows from this however has been shown to be deeply problematic, as Hall has relied upon the likes of Althusser, post-Structuralism and especially the works of Laclau and Mouffe to rethink the nature of social and historical processes, the respective roles played by social structure and human agency, and the specific forms this agency takes. In doing so, the legacy of Gramsci has been significantly distorted by Hall, to act as a theoretical support for his own, particular solutions.

Now there are deep-lying and complex issues to resolve at both the levels of theory and practice here. In terms of the characterisation of social and historical processes, Hall is surely correct to limit the role played by 'objective conditions' in determining their outcomes, and reassert the importance of conscious human activity, in the various forms of political and cultural intervention, as decisive factors. However two critical distortions are contained in Hall's attempts to show that history is 'made' by human agents, not pre-given or 'guaranteed'.

Firstly, the treatment of Thatcherism as master of hegemonic political action in a time of social crisis, illustrating the open-endedness of history, placed so much stress on this

activism as to render the continuing determinations exercised by given material and social structures almost negligible (in particular those of class relations). We are left with a vision of an all-conquering political force, culturally redrawing British society in its own image, untroubled by any enduring constraints upon its practice. This decontextualised entity signals an unregulated contingency as the secret of human history to the Left, who must now act likewise. That perspective is as distorting as the deterministic adversaries Hall set out to combat initially. We cannot replace structural logics and objective processes with ‘cultural politics’ and open-ended horizons lacking any effective determinations, if we are to produce a balanced appraisal of the contours, constraints and openings contained within the flow of human history. Hall’s voluntarism, powered by the influence of Laclau and Mouffe, has radically overshot the mark.

The second flaw in Hall’s portrayal concerns the thinness of his examples of how history can be made through the medium of conscious human action. In contrast to the efforts made by Gramsci as theorist and activist to develop a ‘global’ hegemonic approach, tying together forms of cultural intervention and concrete practices of political organisation, Hall depicts only a one-dimensional ‘cultural politics’, occurring in abstraction from definite modes of political activity and intervention. Thatcherism has culturally struggled to master the ideological terrain – and the Left must too, but in what political forms and on what sites we are never told. His advocacy of an open-ended historical terrain is not accompanied by any substantial ‘concretisation’ of this perspective in terms of potential forms of political organisation or strategies of mobilisation, beyond the optic of ‘ideological rearticulation’. Hall’s own distance from any concrete political practice, or involvement in day to day

struggles and organisations of the oppressed (however we define them) is surely telling here.

As for the characterisation of the active force in historical processes, Hall's work provides few convincing arguments. His preference for human agency has never been soundly theorised since establishing his allegiance to the Structuralist critique of humanism.

Avoiding the apolitical implications of its recasting of subjectivity as a social product, acting compliantly to reproduce the social order, he firstly swapped Althusser for Gramsci and Poulantzas and, later, for the post-Structuralist vision of decentred, fragmented selves, without ever managing to establish a convincing theoretical basis for the active human intervention he wished to support politically. Others within the circle of academic Marxism undertaking parallel siftings of the Althusserian legacy have shown how a complete break with the whole Structuralist – post-Structuralist trajectory in favour of a naturalistic perspective is necessary here.

In terms of understanding the nature of social structure, Hall has failed to go beyond the restrictive conception of 'structure as constraint' taken to its utmost in Althusserianism. He depicted it as an inert limit upon human action (though one whose powers are effectively cancelled by the potent efforts of agents engaged in 'cultural politics'), neglecting the work of those attempting to rethink its dual role, as constraint upon and enabler of human action, insofar as it provides some of their causal powers to 'make history'. The resulting combination of inert objective conditions, unconstrained active struggles and unregulated, contingent historical processes, offered by Hall is of limited use to any attempt to re-found a living Marxist theory and practice.

## Notes

1. Hall does occasionally register the class base of Thatcherism and its project as an alternative capitalist solution. Much more often however there is a blurring of this relation or a preoccupation with its activist ideological strategies and populist appeals, which downplays the role of structural constraints on its political practice (on which see Hall 1988A p4-8).
2. The broader analysis of a post-Fordist society emerging as the backdrop to Thatcherism sketched by Hall has already been discussed in Chapter 6.
3. Two points are worth noting here. Firstly when Hall does note the existence of opposition to Thatcherism, it comes in the form only of social opposition not structural blockages or limitations. These opposing forces (NUM, local authorities) are then portrayed as being ideologically out-manoeuvred by Thatcherism, the deployment of non-consensual forms of power actually central to their defeat being given short shrift. Secondly though it might seem perverse to question the extent of the restructuring of state and civil society along free market lines achieved by Thatcherism from the current standpoint, we need to remind ourselves of the limited degree of the changes achieved up to 1991. It has been the continuation of such trends by the Major and Blair governments that have taken things much further, at our continuing cost (on the continuity between Thatcherism and New Labour see Monbiot 2000; Cohen 2000; Leys 2001; Callinicos 2001; Murray 2001). This recognition is necessary to counteract those who, following Hall, would call for a similar strategic response to New Labour, neglecting to analyse the particular structural context it and we operate in, and their range of specific obstacles and opportunities for intervention. We need an equally structural analysis of, and strategy towards, New Labour as we did for Thatcherism. (For Hall's assessment of New Labour and his weak strategic response to it see Hall 1998A and Hall 2003).
4. There are a series of fundamental problems associated with Althusser's attempts to tie his structuralist framework to the goals of concrete analysis and political practice. On the problematic nature of his efforts to comprehend 'the concrete' see Benton 1983 p79 and Wood 1996 p55. For more general critiques of its functionalism and apolitical dynamic see Callinicos 1982; Geras 1983; Larrain 1983; Anderson 1976A and 1980.
5. Tellingly, in all the overviews of his selective appropriation of Althusserianism, Hall has never challenged the notion of an 'ontology of practices' and their casting of agency in the singular form of instrumentalised labour.
6. Here is another instance of Hall's selective focus on which novel discursive elements of the given conjuncture he engages with.
7. For further critical discussion of this whole approach see Anderson 1983 p32-55; Callinicos 1989A and 1989B; Eagleton 1983 and 1996; Dews 1987.

8. This attempt to create a 'post-Leninist' Gramsci has been described succinctly by David Forgacs who notes the distortion of Gramsci's thought it involves – see Forgacs 1989 p79-88.

9. For extensive critiques of the idealist and voluntarist dynamics present in Laclau and Mouffe see Wood 1986, Geras 1987 and 1988, Hunter 1988, Mouzelis 1988. The impulse towards contingency they provided for Hall has been noted fleetingly by Chris Rojek (Rojek 20003 p125-126).

The notion of the 'gestural' was used by Hall, following Althusser, to identify and reject the latter's belated turn to class struggle in his treatment of ideology (Hall 1980A p35,285). It functions as a *formal* inclusion of a theme that actually remains *substantively* absent from the main body of work in question. As I will show later, precisely such a charge can be levelled at Hall himself.

## **CHAPTER 8**

### **CLASS AND THE SOCIAL**

For many followers of Hall's works over the years, his rejection of tendencies towards reductionism in cultural and social analysis is their most salient feature. Primarily his concern has been to demonstrate the constitutive role played by culture in social life and its irreducibility to supposedly more fundamental, economic processes. Alongside this long-running critique of economic reductionism, his reconstruction of Marxism under investigation here is also marked by a second anti-reductionist impulse, this time involving a refusal to identify the contours of the modern form of the social wholly with its class relations and forces. This is my object of investigation in this chapter.

The precise role played by class relations and forces as foundations of social life and cultural practices in Hall's work is somewhat difficult to clarify succinctly. Class has always featured in his works of the New Left and Complex Marxist periods but its analytical weighting and centrality is not transparently clear. From our investigations so far, we know that Hall's later works of the complex Marxist period (those of the 1980s) are based upon a rejection of his earlier self-defined 'complex class reductionism', setting out to address a complex social order marked by overlapping antagonisms and contradictions. However it is also worth considering the treatment of class in his CCCS works, to see how far they contribute to, or dissent from, a downgrading of class as the essential focus for social and cultural analysis, and any resulting political practice.

## **Changing Class Relations in British Society**

An appreciation of the fluidity and historical mobility of class relations and forces has been evident in Hall's works right from his earliest New Left days, when he attempted to chart the impact of 'consumer capitalism' upon the post-war working class (Hall 1958A; Hall 1959A). In the complex Marxist period that we are concerned with a similar impulse is evident in his analyses of the emergence of post-war youth subcultures, the racial fracturing of class relations and the transformation of class relations associated with the dual impact of Thatcherism and the onset of 'post-Fordism'. Classes, as objective and subjective forces, are not static, ahistorical entities forever fixed in shape by their structural constitution at the level of the mode of production according to Hall. They are continually constituted and reconstituted by a range of social processes, both economic and also those active in the spheres of politics and ideology.

Having said that, it remains to be seen how Hall implements this base-line of historical specificity and complexity in his concrete analyses. If we take the CCCS works first, a set of transformations in post-war class relations were regarded by Hall as lying behind the appearance of an array of youth subcultures in British society. These forces were understood as class fractions, doubly formed at the intersection of class and age relations, from which they developed their own distinctive cultural responses to a series of social

changes confronting and reshaping the whole class and its existing cultural patterns and values. The particular changes Hall identified here were those of an 'uneven' reorganisation of capitalist production disrupting established patterns of work, housing and family structure on the part of the working class. The middle class too faced an equally unsettling expansion of new economic sectors associated with social reproduction (communications, marketing, welfare). For both, the burgeoning consumerist base of capitalist production and its powerful ideologies of affluence offered a challenging cultural alternative to settled parent cultures. Their respective tropes of solidarity and puritanical restraint were insufficient to wholly absorb this new dynamic that their youth fractions responded to.

In *Policing the Crisis* and an associated piece on the development of race relations in Britain, *Racism and Reaction* (Hall 1978D) the post-war establishment of distinctive racial fractions in class relations became Hall's focus. He charted the emergence of an increasingly separate fraction of black labour out of the common position of subordination experienced by the whole working class, a condition of 'secondariness' in terms of access to economic and social resources (jobs, housing, education), that was dramatically amplified by the impact of political and ideological forces and processes. Here Hall invoked the escalating use by reactionary political figures of race and racism as ideological 'signifiers' for a wide range of social problems and an enveloping sense of social crisis. A second dynamic relevant here was the growing salience of a culture of black separateness on the part of black labour, and especially among its youth, who were struggling to survive in such a harsh climate. These features lay behind and powered the phenomenon of



mugging and black street crime. In sum, for black workers and their families, “Race is the modality in which class is lived” (Hall 1978C p394). Again then we seem to have here an appreciation by Hall of particular factors that are transforming class relations in post-war Britain.

When we move on to the analysis of Thatcherism however, a different picture emerges. The sense of change that Hall always carries with him is not satisfactorily established in his series of interventions here. We were given only the merest glimpse of allegedly fundamental transformations Hall believed to be objectively transforming the working class – the collapse or fragmentation of existing workforces, communities and their associated socio-political identities under the impact of post-Fordism.

His attention instead turned overwhelmingly to how Thatcherism was able to shape its strategies to politically exploit this fragmentation and build a social base for itself through its ideological strategies in an increasingly complex and plural social order. It is the latter concern for the ideological reworking of class relations and forces by the potent dynamics of ‘authoritarian populism’ that is Hall’s analytical signature in these texts, the structural context of its operations being only an occasional and mostly belated feature (1).

We have already dealt with some concerns over the voluntarist bias in Hall’s approach and the adequacy of post-Fordism as political economy. Here I want to briefly point out what is crucially absent from his narrative of Thatcherism in terms of its relation (or ‘articulation’) with contemporaneous class relations. It is, as many have pointed out, the strident pursuit of class interest by Thatcherism directed against the working class that underpins so much

of its orientation and policy implementation. To restore capitalist class power and its profitability via the abandonment of Keynesianism, the welfare state and the 'politics of class compromise', Thatcherite socio-economic strategy moved to crush the organised power of the working class and the social supports it had built up throughout the preceding decades. This was vividly reflected in its policies of monetarism, public expenditure cuts, privatisation of the welfare state, tax cuts for the rich, and anti – union legislation (see Miliband 1985 p16-17; Richards and Freeman 1988 p88-98; Sutcliffe 1983 p82,93; Glyn and Harrison 1980 p138-142; Goodman 1987; Gamble 1985 p147-151,194).

To secure this 'class struggle from above', Thatcherism massively enhanced the coercive apparatus of the state, enabling it to crush any resulting social protests and unrest. Of note here was the enhancement of police powers and equipment, draconian legislation to limit public protests and the curtailment of civil liberties (see Fine and Millar 1985 p20; Whittaker 1987 p15-26; Belsey 1986 p167-172; Banks 1989).

The 1984-85 Miners' Strike stands as the classic and pivotal instance of this whole approach, free market economics and state coercion eventually defeating the NUM, one signalling a dramatic restoration of capitalist class power and a long-term reordering of class relations and forces (on the strike as 'class politics' see Beynon and McMylor 1985; Schwarz 1985; McIlroy 1985; Fine and Millar 1985; for Hall's limited and weak response to these events see Hall 1988A p203-205). It is evident that Hall's alternative focus upon ideological struggles and their re-presentation of class interests by Thatcherism is a severely limited perspective from which to discuss such central features of its prosecution of capitalist class power in the 1980s. We have here then one telling instance of the

superiority of approaches to Thatcherism that begin by thoroughly contextualising its political dynamic, in place of focusing primarily upon its ideological strategies.

A second point to note here is Hall's effective exclusion of the impact of other political forces upon contemporary class relations in his treatment of Thatcherism.

Whilst acknowledging the historic dissociation of the working class from Labour as social democracy imploded in the late 1970s, Hall never went on to consider that such popular hostility may have endured and underpinned the electoral dominance of Thatcherism. Yet there were good grounds for following this line, given the relative lack of electoral success enjoyed by Thatcherism in contrast to previous Tory administrations, and the subsequent trajectory of Labour in the 1980s (Miliband 1985 p17-18; Jessop et al 1988 p79,88).

Indeed, it was actually Labour in government that first introduced the policies later pursued more vigorously by Thatcherism (monetarism, public sector cuts) and launched ideological assaults on organised labour, in the wake of its abandonment of Keynesianism (Coates 1980 p5-8,15; for a fuller version of the whole sorry tale see Chapters 1-3). Thatcherism rode to power upon the back of the hostility this reversal generated within the traditional social base of Labour – only to then launch its own more drastic version of the same agenda. Back in opposition in the 80s, Labour never managed to produce any convincing alternative to the programme of Thatcherism, and moved ever further to the right with each electoral defeat. It is this dynamic and its impact upon class relations that has underwritten Thatcherism's successes, not any genuinely popular support for it (Wood 1986 p190-193; Miliband 1985 p18-19; Freeman 1988; Phillips 1988 p22-24). Far from coherently opposing this shift, Hall actually endorsed a redefinition of socialism as compatible with

the market and individual choice, this still apparently constituting an ‘alternative’ to Thatcherism.

## 2

### **Class Formation and Class Practices**

In a text written towards the end of his CCCS career, which we have already summarised, Hall outlined an elaborate template for class analysis (Hall 1977B). This Althusserian-inspired approach insisted upon the historically-specific forms in which classes are constituted from a multitude of structural determinants (irreducible to economic location) and political – ideological practices active within any given social formation. Their modes of organisation, ideological outlooks and interests were not pre-given by an all-powerful economic level but, instead, only elaborated within the arenas of political and ideological struggle, through distinctive processes of representation and articulation. Upon the basis of this complexity, classes exist not as abstract, homogeneous wholes but in the forms of class fractions, alliances and blocs in ever-changing configurations. They are to be discovered theoretically only through concrete analysis, and not deduced from some rigorous schema operative at the level of the mode of production.

If we take this as our base-line and review the actual discussions of class contained in Hall’s concrete analysis, some highly significant and peculiar aspects of Hall’s approach to

class become more apparent. Firstly, although insisting upon their multiple structural constitution, Hall pays next to no attention at all to the *economic* level and its relationship to political and cultural class practices and values. If he charts the impact of changing forms of production upon class cultures at a general level when discussing subculture formation, we hear nothing about the detail of the new forms of work, their impact upon the politics and culture of the 'point of production', nor anything on the continuities and changes that are occurring in existing sectors of production of the 'parent class'. Despite his evident and often-stated commitment to culture as a constitutive force in social life, Hall never follows the likes of Huw Beynon or Nichols and Armstrong into the cultural world of groups of workers on the ground, to examine their 'repertoires of resistance' or active fashioning of cultural and political responses to a common 'class problematic' (see Beynon 1973; Nichols and Armstrong 1976). Neither are we given any guidance as to the empirical size or scope of the shifting forms of division of labour, so as to judge the extent of these changing realities.

An essentially similar tale is told in relation to the impact upon class formation of the settlement of black immigrant labour in post-war Britain. Hall's major concern is the racial fracturing of the class in response to a combination of factors that have left black labour in a condition of 'secondariness', ever-reliant upon its own cultural traditions to survive and depicted through prevalent racist ideologies in mainstream society as a social problem. This general dynamic is not accompanied by any investigation into the structural economic realities of black labour in the workplace, its relationship to existing class forms of organisation (trade unions, political parties) or cultures of resistance and solidarity. Instead Hall simply asserts that processes of class fracturing through the impact of race relations on

the constitution of black labour are underway, using the Althusserian approach of 'relative autonomy' to theoretically account for this unsubstantiated claim. By way of contrast, the empirically-grounded work of Robert Miles and Annie Phizacklea into the condition of black labour in Britain offers a different vision of substantial commonalities between black and white workers that refutes Hall's conclusions on class division and the consequent articulation of race and class. Their reading of 'race relations' in post-war Britain is therefore more reliable as a guide to class formation than Hall's speculations (Miles 1982 p156-180; Phizacklea and Miles 1979 and 1980; Miles and Phizacklea 1984) (2).

In the case of Thatcherism we are even further adrift from any structural analysis of, or empirical investigation into, the impact upon class formation of a set of allegedly fundamental social changes reshaping Britain. Hall provides only a thumb-nail sketch of processes of class decomposition and dislocation resulting from the uneven shift into a 'post-Fordist' era of capitalism. Given the scale of the consequences he imputes to such changes – no less than a reshaping of class working patterns, their communities and cultural identities - we might have expected some substantiation of these changes. What we actually get instead is an analysis of how Thatcherism is politically profiting from them. Even previous concerns to identify class fractions formed upon the basis of multiple structural determinants (subcultures and class/age relations; black youth and race/class articulations) are now absent as Hall shifts ever further into the realm of the political and ideological dynamics of class formation, and away from any structural analysis of its economic composition and recomposition.

The second distinctive feature of Hall's treatment of class is this stress on their political and ideological constitution. The youth subcultures, black wageless and subjects of the Thatcherite historic bloc are forged as much through these 'superstructural' processes as by any objectively-given position and location. And as Hall increasingly points out, their interests are also constituted in these domains, rather than being pre-given by the economic and then reflected in their political and cultural practices.

Now there is a definite shift in Hall's treatment of class formation here. In the CCCS works, there is a strong sense of an objectively-given set of social conditions to which the class fractions under investigation respond, the common 'class problematic', and do so distinctively in relation to the other formative determinants involved in their creation – those of age relations and race relations respectively. If the given conditions don't prescribe their cultural and political formation, they certainly provide strong material interests that are refracted (not simply reflected) in their cultural practices, as subcultural styles and focal concerns, their 'rituals of resistance' including criminal activities such as mugging. In the Thatcherism analysis Hall now alters the balance between these aspects of class formation. Under the influence of Laclau and Mouffe, he argues that social classes possess no objectively given material interests. These are always the result of political and ideological struggles, to create new social identities and interests, making new collective subjects for political projects to mobilise in their struggles for hegemonic power. This shift leaves our sense of who the subjects of the Thatcherite bloc are, in terms of their class origin and economic location, and their reasons for supporting it, in a suspended state. Having relocated the production of social identities and interests within the realms of political and

ideological ‘articulation’, the range and nature of support for Thatcherism is left unclear, as is the issue of its own relationship to fundamental class relations.

Now if Hall’s views on the relative roles played by different social levels in class formation have changed, his concerns for the analysis of cultural practices of marginal class fractions and forces have endured. Looking back now, exactly what was the purpose of his CCCS concrete analyses of subcultures and the ‘revolt of the black wageless’? Both could be reckoned as novel social phenomena, illuminating the landscapes of post-war Britain. And as we saw earlier on, for Hall the novel, occasional elements of a given conjuncture need to be addressed, in the name of producing an historically – specific analysis of the concrete situation.

Yet it could equally be argued that if the changes in class relations Hall pointed to were as significant as he suggested, then ‘the new’ was not only present at the margins of subcultural resistance, but also in the *centre* of working class life and work. Why not then focus upon the impact of these changes for its future development and political mobilisation: new forms of working and their consequences for existing political and cultural patterns and modes of organisation? This route was one resolutely avoided by Hall (and Cultural Studies as a discipline in general), lending substantial credence to our earlier critique of his preference for the conjunctural, ephemeral aspects of a ‘concrete situation’ over its organic, structural relations.

Not only that, he then proceeded to confer a degree of political significance upon these culturally spectacular activities and rewrite Classical Marxist strategy to accommodate then, displacing its core concerns as we have already seen. Surely in the name of politically



relevant theorising, Hall's talents would have been better deployed examining the cultural constitution and transformations of the core of the working class than its youthful symbolic adventures; and focusing upon the strategic issue of how to unite white and black labour, mobilising their combined structural powers and leverage, rather than overstating their divisions into clear separate fractions? The question Hall never seems to ask is this: who actually has the power to achieve social change? And then – how is this force developing and changing? That is a lesson to be drawn from Gramsci's work which passes Hall by entirely, even while he claims to be relating theory to the domain of political practice.

In the case of Thatcherism Hall has us concentrating upon the realm of 'the popular', an indeterminate and contradictory terrain of popular values, traditions and experiences, as a key site of class formation. As Thatcherism was able to intervene here and build a new version of 'the people' in a reactionary guise behind its political project, by connecting with some of these traits and making them consonant with its own objectives, so the Left must too. This alternative version of the formation of a 'collective will' was to lead to some peculiar places for the Left. Although Hall never empirically established his arguments on Thatcherism's colonisation of 'the popular', he did not hesitate to demand that the Left analogously address some of its variety of concerns, including those previously considered as anti-socialist - in particular its affinities with consumption, individualism and nationalism. This strategy was to take centre stage, beyond any concerns to reconnect with the new configurations of work and divisions of labour and their collective agencies, the enduring base of Left politics centred upon organic class relations. Once again, the novelty of occasional elements (the populist bid for working class support by Thatcherism)

supplants a properly structural focus in Hall's treatment of class formation. By now however, Hall is moving towards a new vision of the social order, irreducible to class relations, where a multitude of social contradictions and forces need to be politically and ideologically mastered and articulated as collective agents of transformation. Class formation is no longer enough to secure social change.

### 3

## **The New Social World**

Whatever the ambiguities and shortcomings of Hall's treatment of class, for the most part his CCCS works were rooted in a class-based framework and analysis of society. With *Policing The Crisis* however a new direction is launched, one focusing upon the existence of non-class relations and forces, whose own internal configuration, distinctive dynamics and 'articulation' with class relations must be examined in terms of their 'relative autonomy'. This trajectory was taken much further in the works of the 1980s. Now Hall offers a picture of a social order traversed by multiple social contradictions and antagonisms, irreducible to class, whose plurality can only be mastered politically by an anti-class reductionist strategy. These diverse social interests and forces can only be unified ideologically, under the capacious banner of 'the people'. Coupled with this, he also insists upon the need for a theoretical and strategic appreciation of 'the popular' as a distinct social terrain, equally irreducible to class. Here a wide array of popular traditions, beliefs,

experiences and social movements exist that any truly hegemonic political project must engage with to create popular support for itself and build a social base. Both these theoretical shifts are heavily bound up with the work of Ernesto Laclau, and their potential to found an alternative Marxist perspective to “class reductionist” analysis and strategy are the subject of my investigations below. We will begin with the concept of ‘the popular’ as a new social arena and political category.

## **Contesting the Popular**

We have already detailed some of the problems involved in Hall’s focus upon ‘the popular’ as a key site for political intervention, one allegedly mastered by Thatcherism – in particular the lack of any empirical substantiation of his analysis, and some consequences for the Left of likewise contesting this indeterminate arena. Let us pursue this further. Hall took over the concept from the early work of Laclau who, as we will recall, described the popular as an underdetermined terrain, containing contradictory elements and experiences, ever-open to rearticulation by hegemonic political forces seeking to produce new versions of ‘the people’ as its collective subjects. Indeed this struggle for the popular signalled the centrality of ‘the people – power bloc’ contradiction within the social formation, displacing class contradictions. The potential for contestation and rearticulation lay in the essential indeterminacy and neutrality of these elements, and their availability for variable political recuperation. Such a model of the popular was to prove an extremely problematic inheritance for Hall’s stated aims of renewing Marxism, however.

One concern lies in the degree of indeterminacy and openness of popular traditions, experiences and values granted by Laclau and Hall. It is because of this alleged neutrality that a much wider range of popular concerns (nationalism, individualism, consumption) now become available for intervention by the Left, and able to be given a socialist ‘accent’, in place of their previous essentialist repudiation as ‘anti-socialist’. We can apparently now more successfully engage with the ‘languages of popular calculation’ and stop the rival forces of the Right reworking the whole terrain for themselves.

This whole approach is ultimately rooted in Laclau’s analysis of ideologies as class neutral ensembles that I want to examine further in the next chapter. Suffice to say here that, in its name, Hall is pressing the Left to chase after clearly anti-socialist traditions and concerns, which if taken up could only weaken its core priorities and strategies in the name of securing contemporary ‘relevance’. We saw exactly where this led in the efforts of the ‘New Times’ analysis developed by Marxism Today in the late 1980s, in which Hall played a central role (3). Here currently popular concerns for pleasure and consumption become the touchstone for a new politics, abandoning classical priorities of equality, popular power and the transformation of production relations. This was surely a dead-end for the Left to reach, signalling an abandonment of any recognisable socialist project (see the collection edited by Hall and Jacques 1989 as a representative sample of this work).

A second relevant point to note against this approach is the historical inappropriateness of Hall’s call to reclaim ‘the nation’ for the Left within a social formation that has resolutely identified nation with racial exclusion, indicating its radical unsuitability for ‘ideological articulation’ (see the comments by Hall’s ex-pupil Paul Gilroy in CCCS 1982 p277-279; for more on the racist content of English nationalism see Miles 1993 p65-79).

To anticipate, the idealist cast of Laclau's analysis of ideologies as indeterminate and provisional ensembles of class neutral elements led Hall here to seriously over-estimate the potential for socialist colonisation of popular traditions. In so doing he has lost sight of the strategic priorities of any socialist project, in the name of an indiscriminate engagement with any and all currently popular attitudes – over-emphasising once again the scope of conjunctural features vis-à-vis organic class relations. It is in the light of such an ill-defined approach that Paul Gibbon's critique of the concept of 'the popular' hits home.

In discussing prevalent trends within socialism in the 1980s Gibbon drew attention to the residual nature of 'the popular' as a category for social analysis, devoid of well-developed conceptual contours through its identification with every non-class phenomena:-

“a second equally wretched assumption is....that the decisive arena of political and ideological engagement is not state power but the 'popular' – a term not explicitly defined, but used as a synonym for 'whatever people are doing'. To this category is absorbed precisely everything” (Gibbon 1982 p125).

Another area of doubt in Hall's approach must be the initial designation by Laclau of the 'people – power bloc contradiction' as central to the social formation, displacing class relations as the foundation of political analysis and calculation. According to Jorge Larraín an unwarranted conceptual inflation is at work here. 'People – power bloc' signifies not a constitutive contradiction but a type of non-class conflict, one of many traversing capitalist society, but never its foundation (Larraín 1983 p165-168). Therefore no sociological warrant exists for Laclau and Hall to displace class struggle and class-based politics in favour of engaging with popular-democratic traditions and subjecting them to all-powerful practices of ideological articulation. The sociological bases of Laclau's and Hall's alternative is our next object of investigation. We can however conclude here that Hall's injunction to urgently address 'the popular' is neither theoretically nor empirically justified.

## A New Plural Social

Hall's initial break from a 'complex class reductionist' vision of society surfaced in his investigation of the racial fracturing of post-war class relations in *Policing The Crisis*. By the time of the Thatcherism analysis, things had gone much further. As we have seen, in place of examining historically-specific articulations of race and class, Hall now offers a conception of the social as an increasingly complex and plural order, with a range of active contradictions, antagonisms and forces that refuse any easy or neat prioritisation in relation to class foundations. The main source for Hall's vision lies in the later work of Laclau, in association with Chantal Mouffe. Together they attempted to develop a *post-Marxist* hegemonic politics adequate to a society with no single foundation and overlapping social antagonisms, and an expansionary democratic dynamic politicising ever more arenas of social life. The resultant plurality of progressive social forces were democratically equivalent and not subordinate to class interest or agendas. Hall draws upon this framework for his own very different agenda of renewing Marxism in conditions of social plurality and complexity, a theoretical move that does not prove to be fruitful or convincing for his stated aims (4).

One example of this lies in his claims on the successes of Thatcherism as a political force, hegemonically addressing the range of contemporary political forces and issues to build a broad base of popular support across many social sites in civil society. Yet, once again, there is no empirical substantiation for these claims over its connection with the 'proliferation of sites of power'. The actual extent to which it did construct an enduring

‘historic bloc’ by taking a leading position on issues of race, gender and moral conduct, and then ideologically reworking ‘the popular’ is not theoretically secured by Hall. It could just as plausibly be argued that certain social groups and forces offered only pragmatic support, or even found no satisfactory parliamentary-political representative and hence abstained electorally. As we should recall in the face of Hall’s portrayal of Thatcherism as a highly effective political machine, it always governed on a minority of the vote – and was less popular than previous Tory regimes (Miliband 1985 p17-18). Without empirical investigation, we simply cannot make the theoretical jump Hall does from ideological strategies and rhetorics employed by Thatcherism to its assumed all-conquering popular impact.

As for the contours of this new plural social order apparently mastered by Thatcherism, Hall has far too little to say. No sustained structural analysis is undertaken theoretically to ground this hasty alternative to class-reductionist perspectives – he merely invokes apparently fundamental trends before passing on quickly to their political consequences and Thatcherism’s alignment with them. We have no theoretical guide on how this multitude of social relations and antagonisms are composed, how they relate to each other, the combination of structural constraints and opportunities they afford to political projects, nor of the social forces and their interests thereby produced. This absence is one caused by Hall’s over-reliance upon an idealist perspective concerning the discursive, as opposed to structural and material, constitution of social identities, interests and powers, as popularised by Laclau and Mouffe. The strategic consequences of such a move will be taken up in Chapter 10.

It is because of this that the structural basis of Thatcherite hegemony is never established in Hall's reading. We are not given any detailed and clear indication of the economic interests and forces that impact upon its political manoeuvres – the responses of different sectors of capital, the role of international economic processes – and their role as constituent forces in its 'historic bloc' (Jessop et al 1988 p75-76,95,113,115-116) (5). In addition, the non-class antagonisms of gender and race are given equally short shrift despite Hall's stated belief in their centrality to the new political agendas. As Andrew Gamble notes, Thatcherism launched many of its attacks on the 'permissive society', in the name of restoring traditionalism and social authority, through reversing previous 'liberal' regimes of sexual behaviour and immigration. The goal of a patriarchal and white nation lay behind its attacks on women's aid and black rights once in power, a policy dynamic far too little featured in Hall's narrative (Gamble 1988 p197-201).

By way of conclusion then, we can say that the new plural social envisioned by Hall as the terrain for existing and future political interventions is radically undertheorised. In place of any thorough analysis of its sociological constitution and the empirical extent or scope of its diverse forces, he offers an idealist approach centred upon the discursive constitution of social identities and interests. That leads to a serious over-exaggeration of the powers wielded by political forces at the expense of sufficient awareness of the material and structural bases of their projects, with their range of operative constraints and opportunities. The grounds on which Thatcherism advanced are not adequately dealt with here. 'Class reductionism' has been displaced – but a great gulf in our sociological understanding of contemporary society and its political possibilities is all that Hall can offer to replace it (Wood 1986 p12-15,90-91).



## Conclusions

What, then, can we say about the place of class in Hall's 'complex Marxism'?

We have seen an enduring concern for the changing shape of class relations, their continual recomposition, against which novel cultural phenomena in subordinate classes are read (that is, subcultures, black muggers, popular support for reactionary political forces) – but the burden of Hall's analysis always falls on these cultural responses rather than their objective conditions. In doing so, the impact of such changes upon the core of the working class and its objective location at the point of production are never of concern to Hall – indicating a significant distance from any appreciation of its central role in social and political life. As the foundational role of class relations disappeared in his later works, Hall lost sight entirely of absolutely central class-related features of the Thatcherite years – its prosecution of 'class struggle from above' on behalf of capital, the negative impact of other political forces (Labourism) upon class relations and their political affiliations.

Despite developing an elaborate model of class formation stressing its structural and political complexity, Hall never was able to fully deploy this in his concrete analyses, persistently avoiding the economic determinants and dynamics at work in their 'articulation'. The 'point of production' and its political and cultural traditions are never on Hall's agenda, the shifting forms of division of labour and work patterns left for others to establish (6).

In their wake his attention turns to the fracturing of class by other cross-cutting social dynamics (age and race relations) and later to the ever-increasing role played by political and ideological determinants in the formation of class interests and identities, a discursive constitution immune from structural constraints. We never get a sense of the structural powers held by the class as a whole and the detailed impact of social changes (consumerism, black immigration, economic crisis and restructuring) upon its political potential.

Beyond CCCS, Hall's perspective shifted towards a new vision of society and politics where class lost its foundational status, being now only one of many social antagonisms open to political recuperation. This alternative to class reductionism was one he was unable to secure theoretically due to a persistent avoidance of any sociological investigation into the structural composition of the new plurality. Instead the powers of 'discursive articulation' were invoked as the key to forging a collective will or unity from such a diverse landscape, an idealist distortion that underpinned his wilful exaggeration of the hegemonic powers of Thatcherism. His resort to an all-embracing category of 'the popular' as theoretical and political guide in a new social order overplayed the significance of popular traditions and experiences as a terrain for political intervention, at the expense of class relations. It also exaggerated their degree of indeterminateness, and hence appropriateness for a Left politics reduced to 'learning from Thatcherism'.

Throughout all the work reviewed here, Hall's approach has been consistently undermined by his own refusal to engage in any thorough sociological analysis of the conjunctures and dynamics he is concerned with, a trend accentuated in the later works where the malign

influence of Laclau and Mouffe looms large. The changing role of class relations and forces in social and political life has never been clearly established, functioning more as a backdrop to extensive analyses of occasional cultural phenomena, of unproven significance. Empirically, no effort has been made to ascertain the scope of the social changes sketchily portrayed (but presented as dramatically salient for the Left), nor of the cultural phenomena he has lavished (wasted?) so much attention upon. One reason for this whole orientation towards the cultural and the speculative may lie in Hall's determination to avoid any tendencies towards economic reductionism, a long-running object of critique to which we can now turn.

## Notes

1. He did begin his analysis of Thatcherism with its attempt to impose an alternative capitalist solution, but thereafter spent most of his time on the ideological mechanics of its operations, ones carried out apparently unregulated by any structural constraints, before later adding-on the sketch of an emerging post-Fordist political economy as its structural backdrop. There is a serious methodological issue involved in such a move, to which I will return in the next chapter.

2. There are substantial differences in theoretical approach here. For Miles, the inter-subjective reality of race does not confer upon it adequacy as an object of social science. Instead we must look beyond its 'phenomenal forms' to the underlying structures and essential relations generating such processes of racial categorisation, those of capital accumulation and class relations. Therefore it is redundant both theoretically and politically to consider an 'articulation' of race and class, for the former is not an appropriate category to base either upon, whatever its day to day lived reality. Instead only a class-based perspective can deliver the appropriate insight and strategy to confront capital, based upon a notion of the unity of migrant and indigenous workers (Miles 1982 p19-21-30-37,42-43; Miles 1993 p39-49). The focus now falls upon examining the 'racialisation' of social relations from the perspective of political economy. Miles' alternative reading of post-war class formation in Britain on this basis scales down the strength of any division between black and white workers, and the significance of the so-called 'revolt of the black wageless' Hall focuses on.

3. These 'New Times' pieces have been excluded from my investigations of Hall's renewal of Marxism. They do share certain affinities with the texts I have examined earlier on – renewing Left politics in the light of new social conditions transforming capitalism, highlighting the role of cultural politics in creating political identities, addressing the proliferation of social antagonisms. However they also contain the beginnings of a new *post-Marxist* approach and orientation on Hall's part, illustrating their status as transitional texts to a new phase of Hall's career.

Hall now abandons previous commitments to a 'global' analysis and transformation of the whole social formation, in a turn to a new agenda marked by concerns for the impact of globalisation, modernity and the dynamics of identity-formation in a post-nation state, post-socialist world (see Hall 1989D; 1989E; 1989F). The subsequent history of this theoretical framework and its affinities to post-Structuralist writers is not our concern here (for examples see Hall 1991A, 1992B and 1992C on 'globalisation'; Hall 1992C and 1992D on 'modernity'; Hall 1989G, 1993B, 1996H, 1996J, 1996K on 'cultural identity and representation').

4. Once again, Hall has summoned up the example of Gramsci as theoretical precursor for this appreciation of a new complex configuration of social power. This is, of course, yet another distorted interpretation used by Hall to bolster his own claims. Gramsci may well have recognised the role of multiple forces in forging a collective will – workers, peasants and intellectuals. This did not however lead him to a repudiation of the foundational role of class relations in social life or political practice in the manner of Hall, nor an assumption of

‘democratic equivalence’ between all members of this prospective alliance. Gramsci is not a forerunner of this problematic conception offered by Laclau and Mouffe, and enthusiastically borrowed by Hall in his retreat from ‘complex class reductionism’.

5. Jessop et al go on to contrast the work undertaken by Colin Leys on the material and institutional basis of Thatcherism to Hall’s limited efforts. Here the structure of the British economy, the balance of class forces, as well as the forms of political organisation social classes adopt in their relations with the state move to the centre of the analysis (Jessop et al 1988 p114-116). We need to examine the dimensions of hegemony within the power bloc itself as well as the parameters of securing popular consent.

6. This de facto ‘division of intellectual labour’ is one Hall has consistently accepted in practice and also endorsed theoretically in his exchange with Jessop et al on the correct approach to Thatcherism. I will consider this debate in the next chapter. One salient feature Hall neglected here was the increasing ‘feminisation’ of the proletariat and the likely consequences this would have for new forms of political struggle.

## CHAPTER 9

### CULTURE, POWER AND THE ECONOMIC

Stuart Hall leaves us in no doubt that culture is to be seen as a constitutive force in social life. At the very outset of his career he stressed this as a key theme of the humanist alternative to traditional, economistic Marxism:-

“We want to break from the view that cultural or family life is an entertaining side-show, a secondary expression of human creativity or fulfilment. There can be no simple base-superstructure here, for that is to offer too limited a conception of our social nature” (Editorial ULR4 1958 p3).

This endorsement of the power of culture as a distinctive and effective force in society is still one Hall adheres to, although the particular theoretical frameworks he has used to conceptualise the impact of culture – its nature and interactions with other social relations and arenas – have altered radically over the intervening forty years. Indeed we can say that a fundamental determinant of Hall’s break with his original ‘socialist humanist’ perspective on society and culture was his theoretical encounter with the texts of Western Marxism from the late 60s onwards, which held out the prospect of a richer appreciation of both these categories. As he himself noted, the humanist alternative provided only limited notions of culture and society, marred by essentialist reductions of their dimensions and dynamics to an underlying human praxis and foundational subjectivity (Hall 1980A p28-31; Hall 1980B p55,63-64,66-69).

The new resources open to Hall were deployed energetically and creatively in his many concrete analyses of cultural phenomena carried out during the CCCS years, and then subsequently in the following decade under the banner of a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. Here I want to begin a critical review of his efforts to demonstrate the formative role of culture in society by considering their varying merits and relative powers in theorising the realms of culture and ideology.

## **1**

### **Theorising Culture and Ideology at CCCS**

In terms of their stated aims, the series of cultural studies Hall produced at CCCS can be considered as relatively accomplished and successful. His intention was to show the cultural realm as a 'relatively autonomous' level of society, possessing its own distinctive and historically effective relations, processes and forces, yet also interrelated with other social levels and domains. This dual alternative to economically reductionist and idealist perspectives was to address the 'double articulation' of cultural forms, practices and institutions, examining their complex and historically specific internal configurations, the 'non-identical' links they exhibited with their wider environment and its determinations, and the consequent plurality and contested nature of the whole terrain and its individual forms.

On that basis, the works we considered earlier do reflect their animating impulse. The discussions of their internal dynamics covered the nature of its distinct process of cultural production ('signification'), the configuration of particular institutions (mass media) and the complex character of the over-arching fields of cultural relations and ideologies. Hall here demonstrated the insufficiency of perspectives on economy - culture and class - culture relations that portray these as simple and unidirectional. Instead both individual cultural forms and the wider field of cultural relations are complex and the products of multiple social determinations, lacking any immediate class fixity and purity. The structuring of these internal dynamics through their links with the wider social environment was crucial – as illustrated in the treatment of post-war youth subcultures and shifting cultural relations, charting their historically specific forms in tandem with changes at the level of the economy and wider class relations. This was a class-related but not class reductionist approach.

A second feature of Hall's approach was his insistence on the historical mobility and openness of these forms and relations. There was no essential, eternal configuration conferred upon the cultural arena, forever locking it into domination by ruling class ideology and precluding subordinate class resistance. Despite its structuring into relations of cultural inequality, there was always space to contest dominant cultures and offer oppositional decodings of media products, or reappropriate cultural objects provided by the dominant culture in terms of the focal concerns of a subordinate culture. Of note here were the characteristically indeterminate nature of cultural signs precluding any essential class-culture relations and allowing political challenges to be launched against existing 'significations', the impact of wider processes of class struggle upon the cultural realm



(for example the social radicalisation associated with 1968 and their new awareness of the salience of 'cultural politics'), and the internal contradictions traversing the institutional locations of cultural reproduction. Each served to inject a degree of space and political possibility into the cultural arena.

Along the external dimension Hall attempted with a fair degree of success to reformulate the nature of class-culture relations and show the degree of internal contradiction and friction between superstructural institutions involved in cultural reproduction. His perspective on the changing cultural relations of post-war Britain insisted upon the 'double determination' of its individual cultural forms (youth subcultures) formed in response to shifting patterns of class relations and the dialectic of dominance and subordination marking these wider cultural relations. Youth subcultures drew on both fundamental class-cultural traits and the burgeoning culture of consumerism to 'express' their focal concerns, existing as historically specific and complex phenomena, not secondary reflections of some essential class existence or domination by an alien, ruling ideology (1).

In examining the relations between the mass media and the realm of politics, Hall outlined the contradictory and open-ended nature of processes of social reproduction. This involved an articulation of non-identical institutions, each possessing its own relative autonomy, with the structuring of the media through its external determinations occurring via the operation of its own distinctive procedures, which work to produce consent to overall hegemonic domination. The degree of success involved here depended upon the state of play in wider processes of class struggle (and the existence of any genuine counter-hegemonic alternative) as well as being characterised by a degree of conflict, or 'secondary

contradictions', between media and political elites. This was not some functionalist concert of parts harmoniously working to a pre-ordained end.

Taken as a whole then Hall's CCCS works offered a potentially compelling alternative to existing Marxist approaches. He wanted to underscore the complexity, multiple determination and historical open-endedness of cultural forms, practices and institutions, replacing class reductionism with a mediated vision of class-culture relations, their historically changing configurations and the range of operative determinants upon them – institutional conflicts, cross-cutting social dynamics, dialectics of cultural power, changing forms of production and their social consequences. This complexity, of both the whole terrain and its individual forms/practices, was accompanied by an appreciation of the ineliminable degree of open-endedness and political potential. It was always possible to resist dominant cultures, to reappropriate their products and messages, to make space within both the institutional locations and wider relations of the cultural field for the production of genuine alternatives.

It is to these ends that Hall employed such a wide range of theoretical influences in his CCCS works. An overall Gramscian perspective on the nature of cultural relations and the dynamics of cultural power and hegemony was allied to Poulantzas's work on the relative autonomy of superstructural institutions and their reproductive functions, as well as his efforts to offer a non-reductionist treatment of class-ideology relations. In addition, Hall was taken by the Structuralist arguments elaborated by Barthes on the indeterminacy and open-endedness of the sign as the basic cultural element. This functions here to underwrite

the possibility of a culturally variable reception for dominant cultural forms, reining-in the powers once ascribed to the Dominant Ideology, and opening up the potential for cultural resistance and opposition, up to and including the goal of a genuinely counter-hegemonic force envisioned by Gramsci. Other factors were also significant in theoretically securing the possibility for cultural resistance – the impact of wider processes of class struggle and the internal contradictions present within the institutions of cultural transmission.

Now many critics have viewed these CCCS works as an unconvincing amalgam of disparate theoretical borrowings, pointing their analyses in radically divergent directions. What I have tried to do here instead, is to establish their unity and overall perspective, one typically overlooked by others, for reasons I have previously addressed. And yet there is within Hall's range of selective appropriations here a potentially fatal element – the Structuralist vision of language and culture – that comes to play a highly damaging role in his later works, carried out under the presiding influence of Ernesto Laclau. In the CCCS works this destabilising element is held in check by Hall's greater appreciation of the material and institutional bases of cultural forms and practices, and by his identification of other determinants underwriting cultural resistance and political intervention. When we turn to the works of the 1980s, the consequences of Hall's continuing allegiance to the Structuralist perspective become quite drastic in terms of his overall project to renew Marxism.

Before doing so, we must consider another charge levelled at Hall. Colin Sparks's review of Hall's career saw these CCCS cultural studies as fatally compromised by his adoption of the Althusserian problematic of 'relative autonomy'. This led to a latent idealism in the

treatment of cultural forms, concentrating upon their internal dimensions and effectively ignoring their external determinations, including, of course, the famous ‘determination in the last instance by the economic’. I suggested earlier that these works cannot simply be written off as idealist – for Hall does relate cultural forms to changing economic contexts (youth subcultures and capitalist reorganisation in post-war Britain) and other social levels (the articulation of mass media and political superstructures).

And yet, set alongside other contemporary approaches investigating in detail the capitalist organisation of cultural production and its impact upon particular cultural forms and practices – the so-called ‘Political Economy of Culture’ – Hall’s works do lack sufficient consideration of these economic dynamics. He seems content to rest on the argument that whatever the circumstances of production, cultural objects do not effortlessly relay pre-given (‘encoded’) messages or meanings due to the ‘relative autonomy’ possessed by agents in their ‘decoding’ practices, implying that a sole focus on production is itself insufficient.

That is fair enough but, as Jim McGuigan has pointed out, Hall’s de facto neglect of the moment of cultural production has encouraged a damaging schism in Left cultural analysis, which remains to be repaired. Hall’s fear of economic reductionism has led to a downgrading of the enduring significance of the economic basis of cultural production (McGuigan 1992 p 40-41, 244-245). Here then is another illustration of the theoretically damaging impact upon Hall’s works of his animus towards economic reductionism, replacing a preponderant concern for the economic circumstances of cultural production with an equally one-sided treatment of their variable reception and cultural resignification.

(On the subsequent history of cultural studies and its increasingly populist neglect of the moment of economic production see McGuigan 1992 p5-6,30,34,40-41,63-70,76-84,171-174,211-213,244-249).

## 2

### **Laclau and the Discursive Turn**

If a degree of theoretical eclecticism characterises Hall's cultural studies at CCCS, the works of the next decade show a more singular influence. Ernesto Laclau's flight from class reductionism in Marxism had led to him to distinctive perspectives upon the nature of ideology and the social formation, wherein the role of class is substantially downgraded. There were no essential class-based ideologies for the constitutive elements of any ideology are indeterminate and class neutral, provisionally linked together in wider ensembles that are equally contingently related to social forces and their political projects. This 'doubly articulated' vision significantly enhanced the degree of historical mobility and open-endedness in class - ideology relations, signalling a decisive role for active cultural and political intervention in their production. Furthermore the ideological played a central role in the creation of social subjects, producing the basic identities and interests of social forces, rather than reflecting any pre-given objective traits. Taken in tandem with Laclau's identification of increasingly important non-class arenas and relations in the social

formation (especially that of ‘the popular’ and its contradictory range of indeterminate elements) the scope for culture as a constitutive force in social life, and the salience of cultural politics, were radically enhanced.

Hall took over this approach whole-heartedly, using it to rewrite the legacy of Marx’s work on ideology, to analyse concrete organic ideologies such as Thatcherism and to apply its lessons to the terrain of popular culture, a new theoretical and political arena for Marxism to address. Despite the novelty however, Laclau’s perspective contained some serious consequences for Hall’s overall project, as we have already seen. I will concentrate here only on the treatment of ideologies.

If we turn to the question of the constitution of ideologies first, Laclau’s approach leads us to a fundamentally underdetermined and dangerously idealist position. Invoking its indeterminate nature and provisional links to social forces left an impression of an unconstrained free-for-all discursive articulation, devoid of any structural or material limits and determinations. The context of ideological struggle and rearticulations is here effaced – its institutional sites, structural basis in core social relations and generative material interests. In so detaching ideologies from any social base, their well-established linkages to fundamental social classes were downgraded, replaced by a discursive formation expansively calling into existence the social forces they ‘re-present’, up to and including their social interests and identities. The influence of Structuralist approaches to language and culture – the relational nature of the sign, its lack of social determination, and the production of subjects in culture – is palpable here.

In opposition to this grand vision of ideology's constitutive powers, a series of Marxist critics have pointed out its unwarranted assumptions. The constitution of ideologies always occurs in material and organisational contexts that significantly delimit the range of ideological transformations Laclau envisages (Mouzelis 1978 p50-53; Larrain 1983 p201-203). There is no abstract, unconstrained discursive articulation open to political exploitation. We have already noted this point in discussing the constraints upon Thatcherism as an alternative capitalist solution to the crisis of British capitalism, not an unregulated discourse.

Now Hall formally agrees with this point, pointing to the existing historically sedimented limitations, or 'tendential alignments' that endure in concrete social formations and conjunctures. And yet despite this, his substantive analysis of Thatcherism and its challenge to the Left ignores these material constraints, calling repeatedly upon the Left to connect with prevalent popular traditions and experiences (nationalism, individualism, consumerism) as Thatcherism had done, and rearticulate them into its own evolving ideological ensemble, implying their essential indeterminacy and political malleability. His focus is always on the prospects for ideological rearticulation not the structural constraints that delimit the appropriateness and relevance of ideological themes and traditions for socialist strategy. As I indicated earlier this recognition by Hall of the material limitations to discursive articulation, one he claims distinguishes his own position from that of Laclau, is therefore purely 'gestural'. The critiques levelled at Laclau are therefore as equally valid in relation to Hall's own work.

Hall claimed that this new perspective was crucial in allowing the Left to reclaim a foothold in popular culture and its diverse, contradictory amalgam of ideas, traditions and

experiences, 'the languages of popular calculation' that define and organise the activities of the masses. Thatcherism had, he alleged, masterfully intervened on this terrain to create popular consent for its project and summon up a new reactionary version of 'the people' as its collective subject – and the Left must too. However, as we saw earlier on, this whole strategy only encouraged an unregulated and strategically naïve chasing after currently popular trends that failed to consider their relevance for, or appropriateness to, a socialist project rooted in concerns for equality, popular power and social transformation. It could only lead to the dead-end of the 'New Times' approach advocated by Marxism Today (Wood 1986 p197-198; Phillips 1988 p24). The theoretical roots of this whole trajectory however lay in the initial over-estimation of the indeterminacy of ideological elements and its Structuralist lineage.

This basic impulse to abstract ideologies and ideological struggle from their determining material context, focussing instead on its indeterminacy and strategies of rearticulation, does not provide us with a convincing theoretical or political approach. We need a far stronger sense of their material roots, their social anchorage and links with other levels and collective forces. As we saw previously, to isolate the ideological from its political and economic context is to render the social basis of particular political projects (such as Thatcherism) unknown and unknowable. In the end the 'discursive turn' executed by Hall does not signal any advance over his earlier CCCS works – in fact we lose any sense of the external dynamic of ideological constitution despite the formal retention of his 'double articulation' methodology. One telling instance of this is the lack of any concern for the institutional basis of Thatcherism's ideological practices, in direct contrast to his earlier



work on the media-politics relationship. We are here a long way from the guidelines laid down for analysing social phenomena in Hall's reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction, where their internal structures and *connections* with other social relations were due consideration (Hall 1974A p147).

Indeed we actually seem to have fewer possibilities to counteract the challenge of Thatcherism once the dimensions of cultural struggle and resistance are narrowed to those of ideological rearticulation. Prior to this Hall had outlined other determinants underpinning the potential for resistance – internal contradictions within cultural institutions, the impact of wider processes of class struggle. Now we are left only with the internal processes of 'disarticulation-rearticulation' as avenues for cultural advance, and, in Hall's reading of the cultural landscape in the 80s, there are precious few resources to draw upon here in the name of resistance. Ironically one effect of his whole turn to the discursive was to supposedly expand the options for political intervention. Instead we are offered only a 'hard road to renewal'!!

As for the role of ideology in the formation of social subjects Laclau's expansive approach granted it centre stage, including constituting the very identities and interests of both individual and collective variants. Now Hall had always been keen to stress the active nature of political representation in opposition to economic reductionism, as is evident in his reading of Marx's mature works on class formation. Here however the constitutive powers of ideological articulation deployed in political struggle are running unconstrained by any other social processes or determinants.

As Ellen Wood has argued this denial of the existence of objective, material interests powering political projects, subjects and ideologies was mistaken. Despite the variable representation of material interests in the political sphere, these interests do exist outside of any particular political-ideological articulation, generating fundamental conflicts between core classes over issues of economic power and exploitation (Wood 1986 p92-97). Their material structuring of such interests and powers provides the historical anchorage for political projects seeking to win popular support, an extra-discursive determination ignored by both Laclau and Hall. The discursive moment is not therefore the only, nor necessarily the decisive one, in the production of social subjects and collective forces. In addition, many forms of identity are derived from engaging in political practices and social struggles, a materialist basis of subjectivity Hall dismisses (Cohen and Moody 1998 p122; Hunter 1988 p898-899; Geras 1987 p81; Mouzelis 1988 p113-115; Wood 1986 p60-61,198-199).

Hall's excessive reliance upon the discursive constitution of social subjects has another dangerous consequence. We cannot now clearly identify the social basis for any given political project, its links to existing class relations and forces, or their varying degrees of structural power and leverage available to realise their aims. We have already shown Hall's inability to grasp the 'articulation' between Thatcherism and fundamental class relations, its mission to wage 'class struggle from above' on behalf of capital, in his narrative. It is a lacuna clearly related to his theoretical borrowings from Laclau and the recasting of politics as a practice of discursive articulation. In the next chapter we will see that in the arena of

socialist strategy Hall is equally unable to locate a determining social base for its political project, leaving it without any definite and delimited constituency or programme.

### **3**

## **Culture and Power**

Hall's insistence on the formative role of culture in social life is one we have shown to be an abiding concern of his entire intellectual career. Following the 'turn to Laclau' however, the power granted to the cultural in the constitution and reconstitution of social relations has expanded exponentially from an appreciation of its historical effectivity alongside other determinants, to a de facto colonisation of the production of social subjects, political practices and social transformations. We have noted some of the consequences of this shift already. Here I want to focus explicitly on what this 'discursive imperialism' entails for our understanding of the nature of power and political practice in contemporary capitalism.

## **On Power and its Determinations**

If we look at Hall's analysis of Thatcherism from this angle what becomes immediately apparent is the serious narrowing of any appreciation of the range of dimensions along

which power operates in contemporary social life and political practice. In focusing so heavily upon its practices of ideological struggle and discursive articulation Hall neglected other, extra discursive determinations that both underscored its rise to power and were wielded by it as a governing force. We have covered the first of these aspects already. In terms of its strategies of power after 1979, an absolutely central feature of Thatcherism was its reliance upon *coercive powers* to push through its agenda of free-market economic and social reform. Hall pays at best lip-service to its authoritarian dynamic, failing to acknowledge its crucial role in crushing organised working class resistance and other forms of social protest engendered by the unleashing of ‘market forces’. Key events of the 1980s, especially the 1984-85 Miners’ Strike, where the non-consensual powers of the state were massively deployed against the NUM effectively disappear from view here. Hall’s only discussion of this in *The Hard Road To Renewal* runs to a mere two pages, concentrating on its outdated ‘class politics’ and the need to create a popular alliance around wider issues of energy and economic development – another cultural strategy to be ‘articulated’, with no mention of the coercive powers currently on show (Hall 1988A p203-205).

As many other critics have demonstrated, the range of coercive measures taken by Thatcherism during its years of office were extensive, covering a substantial expansion of police powers and legal constraints to effectively cripple mass resistance (Whittaker 1987; Belsey 1986; Fine and Millar 1985; Banks 1989). Even on other issues where Thatcherism encountered strong resistance to its programme – the defiance of Labour local authorities – their defeat has been effected by the wielding of state administrative powers

(legal abolition of the GLC) and the direct imposition of alternative providers for local authority services, increasing the authoritarian powers of the central state. Hall's treatment of this challenge, once again, concentrates upon their ideological out-manoeuvring by Thatcherism, although there is little here to substantiate his belief in the primacy of cultural power and ideological articulation.

Two peculiarities of Hall's approach are worth noting here. Firstly he was actually the author of the characterisation of Thatcherism as an 'authoritarian populism', despite his subsequent neglect of its deployment of coercive force. Why did he ignore the former dimension and concentrate only on the question of popular consent? One likely reason lies in the turn to Ernesto Laclau, which occurs after *Policing The Crisis* and its description of the growing coercive climate in British capitalism and the emergence of Thatcherism. A slightly later text 'Drifting Into A Law and Order Society' (Hall 1980H; written in 1979) actually began to detail some of the aspects involved in this expansion of state coercive powers that others were later to elaborate, but this vector of Hall's analysis was then abruptly terminated (2). In the 1980s Hall's work shifts ever further towards the question of consensual power, the authoritarian dimensions being displaced by a concern for the 'ethical functions' discharged by the state. Even when Hall notes a significant authoritarian drift to Thatcherism occurring in mid-decade he cannot consider this as anything other than the result of its failures at the level of ideological struggle (Hall 1988A p83-84). The relationship of this to its socio-economic strategies of social division and exclusion, its structural basis in the reordering of class power and relations, is not considered.

A second issue to raise here is the perspective on the nature of power Hall announces in *The Hard Road To Renewal*. Employing Gramsci, once again somewhat dubiously, as a theoretical support for his own approach Hall argues as follows:-

“Gramsci understands that politics is a much expanded field; that, especially in societies of our kind, the sites on which power is constituted will be enormously varied. We are living through the proliferation of the sites of power and antagonism in modern society. The transition to this new phase is decisive for Gramsci. It puts directly on the political agenda the questions of moral and intellectual leadership, the educative and formative role of the state...of civil society..... (and) the consent of the masses” (Hall 1988A p168).

“The nature of power in the modern world is that it is also constructed in relation to political, moral, cultural, ideological and sexual questions” (op cit p170).

This expansion of power and politics therefore covers various forms (political and cultural as well as economic), its different sites (within the state and the many institutions of civil society) and a multitude of social relations (sexual, ethnic, gender alongside class). What it does not do is give Hall the licence to ignore well-established and still relevant dimensions of power such as state coercion in his treatments of political projects. Having upheld an expansive conception of power and its varying modalities, his own concrete analyses of Thatcherism repeatedly narrow this down to a question of consensual power and ideological struggle. We never hear of the full range of strategies actually adopted, as we may expect in the light of the guiding theoretical prospectus: of cultural plus coercive plus administrative power.

We may pause to note here that an essentially similar approach is at work in a set of contemporaneous texts, not included in my investigations, which take the object of the state – both as abstract social form and particular concrete institution - as their focus.

Here Hall begins with a formal definition of the dual nature of power wielded by the state, the modalities of consent and coercion already deployed in *Policing The Crisis* (Hall 1984A p14-16; Hall 1981E p479-480). Even here however a different perspective is registered in the conclusion to the latter text, which stresses the role of the 'rule of law' as an educative force and arena of struggle, rather than focus upon the build-up of coercive powers noted in *Policing The Crisis* - a concern for the ethical, not punitive state.

In his concrete analyses of the rise of the modern 'representative/interventionist state, the moment of consent takes centre stage, as he attempts to demonstrate the centrality of formative political and ideological work involved in the transition from laissez faire liberalism to a collectivist organisation of state-civil society relations. It is the mechanics of expanding political representation, the ideological elaboration of new projects, cooptation of the labour movement and the construction of a new social base or historic bloc behind this collectivist shift that preoccupy Hall (Hall 1984B; Hall 1985A). Beyond these issues of consent and ideological unification, the actual role played by state coercive power in this era (dated by Hall as covering the 1880s to the 1920s) is woefully underrepresented. Such vital events as the 1926 General Strike and its relationship to the modalities of state power and coercion are completely absent from the narrative. Surely any convincing approach to the multiple forms of social power existing in advanced capitalist societies would need a more persuasive treatment of its coercive dimensions than Hall has managed here.

Ultimately then we cannot get a satisfactory grasp on processes of social reproduction or transformation if we pay exclusive attention to the formative role of culture. As Hall's texts on Thatcherism showed, political practices are not simply determined or undertaken on the basis of consensual power. The dimensions of coercive power, administrative/legislative actions and the structural context wherein political practices occur are all centrally involved in determining historical outcomes. This matrix of institutions, forces and processes comprise the 'material infrastructure' of hegemony, one all too little in evidence within Hall's narrative.

And furthermore, Hall's recovery of the irreducible role played by cultural power does not necessarily imply that it is of *equal* importance to other well established modalities. This point has been well elaborated by Francis Mulhern. He argues that a guiding motif of the entire project of Cultural Studies, and Hall's own intellectual trajectory, has been to assert the constitutive role of culture and also to displace the role previously played by the political, and its key sites and agents – “to undo the rationality of politics as a determinate social form” (Mulhern 2000 p151). In adopting this belief in culture's historical effectivity Hall presumes its practices actually do possess the same power as other social processes (economic, political) to form and re-form social relations but without being able to show this (op cit p130). Thus, as Mulhern notes, his alternative 'cultural politics' quickly discounts existing political mechanisms, sites and agents (party, state, class) but without establishing any convincing alternative, a point I will elaborate further in the next chapter (op cit p129-131, 150-151, 174). The historical neglect of cultural power in Left analysis and strategy does not imply that we have suddenly found an alternative source of primary power to decipher processes of social reproduction or effect social transformation.



Even in the case of Thatcherism we have shown how Hall over-estimated its cultural power vis-à-vis the terrain of popular common sense, and neglected to address non-cultural reasons for its electoral dominance.

## **The Scope of Cultural Politics**

When Hall turns to the strategic consequences of his belief in the pre-eminence of the cultural, a highly unusual, although academically extremely influential, position has been maintained. Designed in opposition to both economic and class reductionism, he has formulated an approach establishing a series of tasks to be undertaken in producing new social subjects, ideologies and political practices – those of contesting dominant conceptions and subjectivities, intervening upon the contradictory terrains of popular cultures and common sense, unifying the diverse array of progressive forces into a national-popular collective will through the medium of ideology. All this is contained in the practice of ‘cultural politics’.

Now the first thing to say here is that Hall’s aims are distinct from those of Gramsci despite his recruitment of the latter’s conceptual apparatus and stress on the need for ‘moral and intellectual reform’. As was described earlier, the global approach to hegemonic struggle envisioned by Gramsci linked the imperatives of cultural struggle to a wider movement rooted in concrete political intervention within the daily lives of the masses and their institutions and organisations. It did not presume that ‘cultural politics’ was sufficient to achieve revolutionary ends, being rather one necessary modality of struggle in a multi-

faceted strategy operating across economic, political and cultural terrains. By way of contrast Hall's is an abstract academic exhortation to engage in ideological articulation and discursive activity unconnected to any mass organs or political institutions, both in terms of his own practice as a critic and the wider bases for 'cultural politics'.

The strategy Hall prefers becomes a profoundly idealist mission neglecting the extra-discursive dimensions of hegemonic politics. It identifies 'the popular' and the new plurality of social antagonisms as major sites for intervention, without considering the existence of material and structural limits to its practices of disarticulation – rearticulation - unification embedded in these arenas. The inappropriateness of certain popular traditions is one such example. Another would be the presence of distinct and divergent social interests, capacities and powers among prospective progressive allies, implying further political negotiation and organisation to deal with. These features cannot simply be brushed aside by invoking an all-encompassing discursive constitution of social interests and identities, a strategic evasion I will return to in the next chapter.

Furthermore the self-conception Hall offers of himself as an 'organic intellectual' (seen as applicable to CCCS in general) is a serious misrepresentation of Gramsci's model of practically engaged critical theorising. If there is a space for cultural politics within a more global Left strategy, the peculiarity of Hall's example is his distance from any form of practical political activity that could connect it with a potential constituency. His is an individualised relay of critical knowledge, transmitted through the academy and mass media. No involvement with the daily lives of the oppressed or their institutions is

attempted here, a disarticulation of theory and practice that confines cultural politics to an academic ghetto. It has certainly flourished there – as the burgeoning growth of Cultural Studies as a ‘politically engaged’ discipline in the last two decades has shown. None of this has had any definite or significant political impact on the social terrains beyond it however. Instead, divorced from any socio-structural linkage and its particular matrix of constraints and opportunities, the significance of cultural politics has been expanded to cover the totality of strategic options, directed at new sites and agencies (‘the popular’ and its array of diverse forces awaiting unification), and abandoning classical perspectives on class, state and party as key agent, form and goal of socialist practice. In the next chapter we will have to consider further the coherence and the costs of such a political shift.

## **On Gramsci’s Legacy**

The increasingly one-sided consensual optic deployed by Hall in his works of the 1980s is a perspective not solely derived from the work of Ernesto Laclau. Hall himself frequently invokes the example and conceptual framework used by Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks as a guiding light for his own investigations into hegemony, cultural power and the mobilisation of popular consent, a lineage we have dealt with at length. Now we have also seen a recurring tendency for Hall to misinterpret Gramsci’s legacy on such issues as the nature of conjunctural analysis, agency, contingency and determination, as well as the sites and relations of social power, in order to legitimise his own positions. A more global reading of Gramsci’s works – in particular those of the years immediately preceding his imprisonment – has been offered by way of critique of Hall’s misappropriations here.

However in relation to the Prison Notebooks, Hall's favoured text, there is a significant degree of ambivalence in Gramsci's conceptualisation of social power and the scope of its cultural or consensual moment. Perry Anderson's famous discussion of these 'antimonies' drew attention to the competing models of power contained in these notebooks, centred upon Gramsci's vacillating usage of the state/civil society distinction. The predominant model distinguished the prevalence of civil society and rule by consent as characteristic features of advanced capitalist societies, strategically entailing a 'war of position' that prioritised the struggle for ideological dominance over classic scenarios of direct assaults on state power, the 'war of manoeuvre' (Anderson 1976B p10-13,25-26). As a result the role of the state apparatus as a coercive force became neglected in Left analysis and strategy, and a reformist vision of socialism as a process of ideological conversion able to use the existing state form took hold (op cit p41-46). Anderson concluded that the dual nature of power in capitalism – consent plus coercion – must be accompanied by a strategic combination of 'war of position' with 'war of manoeuvre' if the structures of bourgeois power were to be historically dismantled (op cit p71-72,76-80).

Hall's relationship to this particular aspect of the Gramscian legacy is peculiar. In *Policing The Crisis* he covers both modalities of class rule when narrating the trajectory of power in post-war Britain, with its shifting modes of hegemony, culminating in a marked drift to coercion and class domination exercised through the state and its increasing recourse to the law. There is no unilateral consensual focus apparent here. However, when considering strategic responses by the Left to this dynamic – and the 'loss of consent' – Hall makes no mention of the need for counter-coercive measures alongside counter-hegemonic efforts,

such as possible intervention within the mass media to develop an oppositional, anti-racist common sense (Hall 1981C p48-52).

This imbalance between analysis of, and strategy towards, existing configurations of power is removed in Hall's works of the 1980s. Now their common focus is on the question of popular consent - its dynamics, agents and political possibilities, taken to be the key issue of hegemonic politics and basis of social power. The 'war of manoeuvre' and concerns over coercive power are both effaced – as we have seen at length - in his work on Thatcherism. Similarly the more theoretical articles on Gramsci he produced in this decade pay excessive attention to consensual as opposed to other forms of power. Neither version of the Gramscian legacy on the nature of contemporary social power he extracted from the Prison Notebooks is sufficient however to the task of renewing Marxism as a living body of theory and practice. The shift from one to the other is one, we would suggest, intimately tied to Hall's increasing reliance on the idealist perspectives of Ernesto Laclau and his advocacy of 'discursive articulation' as sole analytical and strategic option for the Left.

## 4

### **A Question of Methodology**

One recurring issue in much of the preceding critical review of Hall's 'complex Marxist' works has been his focus upon the formative role played by culture in social life at the expense of considering the determinations active upon the practices of cultural politics and

ideological rearticulation, or the impact of other non-cultural forms of power in determining historical outcomes. In a rare moment of reflection and debate with his critics, Hall's exchange with Jessop et al over the nature of Thatcherism in the late 1980s made this issue the centrepiece of their discussions. It is therefore worth considering for the light it throws on the methodological procedures and positions Hall adopts in his wider project of renewing Marxism.

The concerns raised by Jessop et al focused on Hall's one-sided reading of Thatcherism as an undetermined ideological force, possessing substantial cultural power to reconfigure the terrain of popular culture, and neglecting its relations with other, structural and material forces and institutions that significantly determined its practices. Possible theoretical reasons for this voluntarist 'ideologism' noted by Jessop et al included Hall's reading of Gramsci's concept of hegemony through the Althusserian thematic of 'relative autonomy' and his growing fondness for discourse theory (Jessop et al 1988 p73-74).

Hall replied to this critique by stating he was not offering a 'global' interpretation of Thatcherism, merely examining *one* aspect of its operations "the forms of hegemonic politics" (Hall 1988A p150) in the realms of politics and ideology. Other dimensions remained to be analysed and placed alongside this work to produce a more complete interpretation of Thatcherism (op cit p153-154).

Also he was not guilty of equating hegemony with ideological dominance alone. He had drawn attention to its 'decisive nucleus of economic activity' even whilst concentrating upon the historically neglected realm of ideology, a necessary consequence of the intellectual division of labour (op cit p156). In the light of this defence, have all our preceding criticisms been misplaced, a failure to appreciate Hall's distinctive

methodological strategies in examining the constitutive role of cultural practices in his works of the 1980s?

If we continue with our coverage of this debate, we will see that our earlier reservations were not premature. Replying to Hall's position, Jessop et al effectively dismantled these defences. Firstly the idea of a 'regional analysis of the ideological', able to be placed alongside other regional analyses of Thatcherism's multi-faceted nature, betrays a naïve methodological view of theory as simply additive. There exist "complex interrelations and compenetration" between different moments of a social system, including the operation of external determinants *within* the ideological region that are central to explaining its particular phenomena (Jessop et al 1988 p117; see also Phillips 1988 p20 on this point). We saw this earlier on in Jessop's alternative reading of the institutional basis of Thatcherite populism within the dual crisis of representation in the British state, and their relating of its authoritarian politics to a socially divisive economic strategy (op cit p80-83,91,111,117 and p87-90 respectively). The lesson to be drawn here for the Left is one of developing a properly global analysis, addressing the interrelations between economic, political and ideological processes, rather than fixing upon one (relatively?) autonomous level and considering its internal dynamics alone.

As for the conceptualisation of hegemony, Jessop et al note that Hall's formal recognition of the economic dimension has not led to any substantive analytical coverage of it – the structural basis of the British economy, its class forces and their modes of political organisation and representation gaining little exposure in Hall's texts. He continues to

narrowly treat hegemony as ideological struggle at the expense of deciphering the linkages within the power bloc and their material context, the focus for alternative class-based treatments of Thatcherism covered earlier (op cit p113-116). Another problem here comes when Hall is forced to confront the failure of Thatcherism to construct a genuine consensus, describing it as a merely dominant force. Having excluded non-consensual modalities of political power from the outset, Hall cannot explain the basis for such dominance – is it due to coercion, corruption or the result of structural changes? (Jessop et al 1988 p114-115).

In sum, Hall's enduring ideologistic treatment of Thatcherism is unconvincing as a model for the Left to endorse. Political projects must be approached in terms of the structural determinants operative within the contexts they move upon, examined in relation to the various modalities of social power active upon these terrains, rather than being reduced to abstracted ideological forces. This only overestimates their political powers and leaves their historical and strategic anchorage unknown. As we will see in the next chapter, the political consequences of Hall's approach are grave for the Left and any renewal of Marxism. And that conclusion must pass for all of Hall's works of the 1980s where the unconstrained powers of discursive articulation and cultural politics loom large.

### **A Note On Hall's Rhetoric**

We have on display in his exchanges with Jessop et al a rhetorical strategy used by Hall to defend himself, and criticise others, that we have seen before, in considering his affiliations with Laclau and Mouffe. This is the figure of 'the gestural', an idea taken over from



Althusser that functions to formally acknowledge a theme or point made by, or in relation to, others which is then substantively ignored elsewhere in Hall's on-going concrete analysis. Thus he responds to Jessop's assertion of ideologism by invoking the importance of the economic in hegemonic analysis, without then altering his approach fundamentally to address such an issue (3).

Other examples of this rhetorical strategy occur throughout *The Hard Road To Renewal*. Elsewhere in the debate with Jessop et al, Hall formally agreed with their stress on the continuities evident between Thatcherism and earlier Tory regimes, only to go on asserting its uniqueness and difference in his works (Hall 1988A p158 cf p162-165). On the relationship of Thatcherism to capital, his response to traditional Marxist critics is to stress its anti-reductionist discursive constitution of interests, yet he also remarks upon its role as political representative of capital (op cit p4-6). He accepts Jessop's focus on the authoritarian cast of Thatcherism, claiming to have actually predicted this, but continues to ignore non-consensual modes of power wielded by it (op cit p155).

The 'gestural' also features in Hall's critique of others, used as a stick to beat them with over issues he himself ignores. Miliband's defence of class politics is condemned insofar as it lacks "careful and evidenced argument" (op cit p5). Now this is precisely the analytical dimension we have seen Hall's alternative vision of a plural social order and class recomposition is equally short of – a tendency repeated in his many other characterisations of new social realities and conjunctural configurations. Similarly when Miliband undercuts Hall by producing a class-based reading of the plurality of new social movements, he was dismissed because he "seems to evade all the really difficult, concrete questions of strategy

and organisation which face us in the present conjuncture” (op cit p6). Well, that is exactly the shortcoming of Hall’s vision of ideologically unified complex social blocs where internal conflicts and negotiation are dissolved by the ubiquitous and all-conquering powers of discursive articulation.

## 5

### Conclusions

The concern Hall has demonstrated for the constitutive role of culture in social life has been notably consistent. Two distinctive conceptual frameworks have been used to elaborate this guiding aim in the period we are concerned with. Only one of these however (the CCCS ‘double articulation’ model) has been anywhere near convincing enough as a template for understanding the complex, historically specific and multiply determined nature of the cultural terrain and its external relations with the wider social environment. Its successor, the perspective of discursive articulation taken over from Ernesto Laclau, exhibits few of these merits. An internal examination of the cultural formation of ideologies, social subjects and political projects led to a series of distorted views on the formative power wielded by cultural practices, the salience of ‘cultural politics’ and a wilful neglect of other forms of power as determinants of historical outcomes, including their constraints operative within the terrain of the cultural itself. Hall’s work on Thatcherism as ‘authoritarian populism’ and his advocacy of the realm of popular culture

as a vital site for Left theoretical and political intervention are indelibly marked by these disfigurements. Here the charges of idealism and a neglect of the relations between ‘culture and society’ made by Colin Sparks against the whole of Hall’s Marxist output are certainly valid.

Which leaves us...where? Hall’s mission to recover the primary role played by culture in society is on-going in his current post-Marxist theoretical corpus. His attempts to render this within Marxism have proved uneven. Perhaps one solution lies in re-formulating the initial aim. We could make a useful distinction between constitutive powers and primary powers in the formation of social processes. Culture can be granted a formative role, without it being seen as a primary power equivalent to those of economics and politics. This doesn’t resolve the issue of how to conceptualise its ‘double articulation’ – internal configuration and external interrelations. But it does reorder its significance for Left projects and their range of pressing problems, at analytical and strategic levels.

## Notes

1. Furthermore, as we have already seen, these cultural forms are also subject to the operation of a third determinant upon their constitution, namely their location within age relations that impacts upon their particular response to the common class problematic, producing them as a distinct class fraction.
2. Here we must note the degree of mis-representation present in the recent account of authoritarianism in Thatcherism and beyond undertaken by Joe Sim. Sim's work claims to be an elaboration of a "major but recently neglected aspect of Hall's work" (Sim 2000 p318), a coercive history of the last two decades inspired by Hall's original analysis. I think that is incorrect. The neglect of this aspect of Hall's work is one begun by its very author and his increasing concerns for consensual power. It is Sim, not Hall, who shows us the relationship between increased state coercion and the 1984-85 Miners Strike, and tellingly contrasts Thatcherism's differential treatment of working class protest with the 'crimes of the powerful' (op cit p322-326). His is an example of what Hall could have achieved without the intervention of Laclau's influence.
3. By which we mean a far more thorough and sustained investigation than the 'sketch' of post-Fordist political economy Hall turned to in his later analysis of Thatcherism as a shadowy context for its operations.

## CHAPTER 10

### IN THE REALM OF THE POLITICAL

So far our critical review of Hall's renewal of 'complex Marxism' has concentrated upon its theoretical shortcomings, although we have had occasion to note some of their political consequences along the way. Finally we must turn to the question of politics and strategies directly. Now this is no arbitrary shift of perspective. Hall has consistently stressed the need to make theoretical analysis politically relevant and not a mere academic pursuit. One of the founding principles of his renewal of Marxism was a concern to re-connect the realms of theory and practice severed by Althusser's recent intervention, an 'articulation' that was to be directed towards the 'concrete analysis of concrete situations'. To attain theoretical and practical mastery of the given conjuncture Hall argued we must abandon fixed, universalistic principles and strategies, if we are to respond effectively to their unique combination of constitutive elements, forces and processes. Similarly he cast the role of his work at CCCS (and of the Centre as a whole) in terms of a modern version of the Gramscian 'organic intellectual', aiming to internally challenge contemporary ideologies and engage in tasks of public education, whilst externally forging links with new and emergent social forces. Given that, we are forced to consider Hall's works in terms of their political potential, a discussion I will structure around the themes of strategies, agents and the forms and sites of political intervention. In a final section I will then consider exactly what the critical practice of Stuart Hall amounts to.

There are some hard and searching questions to be asked of this ‘complex Marxism’ as a political alternative. But that is as it should be, for Hall’s works have been far too delicately handled by existing commentaries, undertaken in the main from within the field of cultural studies. Since I don’t belong in that domain, not sharing many of its key assumptions on the importance of culture and ‘the popular’ in social relations, my critique is able to develop along more critical lines – a more ‘oppositional’ decoding of his encoded messages as it were. This was the promise of Chris Rojek’s recent work – but, as we have seen, his critique of Hall is far too limited and generous.

## **1**

### **Strategies of Social Change**

How to get from the capitalist here to a socialist there is a question Hall provides two different answers to in his ‘complex Marxist’ period. In the CCCS works we appeared to be working from existing assumptions of a class-based process of social transformation. However the ‘concrete analysis of concrete situations’ Hall delivered vis-à-vis youth subcultures and mugging only produced unexpected complications for Classical Marxist approaches, in the shape of concrete class fractions, whose contemporary cultural practices prevent class unification, and furthermore, cannot be comprehended along traditional axes of ‘reform-revolution’. Far from dismissing these novel social phenomena, Hall argued we

must actually historically rework our theoretical and strategic perspectives to incorporate their political challenges. This involved recognising a wider repertoire of strategies undertaken by subordinate classes in response to their social location than hitherto understood from the perspective of 'revolution'.

"It has been misleading to try to measure the whole spectrum of strategies in the class in terms of this one ascribed form of consciousness, and to define everything else as a token of incorporation. This is to impose an abstract scheme onto a historical reality. We must try to understand, instead, how, under what conditions, the class has been able to use its material and cultural 'raw materials' to construct a whole range of responses.....Even those which appear again and again in the history of the class, are not fixed alternatives (reform vs revolution), but potential historical 'spaces' used and adapted to very different circumstances in its tradition of struggle. Nor can we ascribe particular sociological strata of the class to particular, permanent positions in the repertoire. This, too, is quite a-historical" (Hall 1976A p45).

For Hall such a vision had the benefit of radically expanding our awareness of what counts as political activity and addressing the concrete historical forms of class practices instead of operating with only abstract, universal schema (see his positive retrospective verdict on conceptualising social change in this way at CCCS in Hall 1996E p294-295). What we need to recognise here however is that within these works there is a dangerous neglect of the structural basis of socialist change, that is the differential impact of strategies of 'reform' and 'revolution' upon the capitalist mode of production and its amelioration or transformation. These fundamental options cannot be wished away by rewriting political strategy as a conjuncturally defined vehicle in the name of a theoretical commitment to historical specificity. We are always confronted by this structurally derived dichotomy in political practice. Ignoring this, Hall loses a vital basis for the adjudication of, and discrimination between, contemporary class practices and their strategic potential. The 'expansion of the political' he endorses carries with it a marked *contraction* of political judgement, a dynamic ever more present in his subsequent works.

This basic point is one we have had reason to address already in relation to Hall's damaging over-emphasis upon conjunctural rather than organic dimensions in the analysis of concrete situations – that is his preference for the novel, occasional features at the expense of structural and enduring processes. It also recurred in the implications for socialist strategy of conferring political significance upon current class practices (subcultural styles, black muggers) that then displaced existing classical perspectives upon the agents, forms and sites of political practice. The methodological commitment to historical specificity is beginning here to over-run the core parameters of Marxism which he sought to revive through it, signalling a shift away from the essential social forces and their structural powers that define its programme and constituency. The contrast drawn earlier with the example of Gramsci as a 'theorist of the concrete' offered a more plausible role for historical specificity and conjunctural forces in Marxist reckoning.

In the next decade Hall's treatment of Thatcherism and its challenge to the Left took this basic orientation further, within a new vision of the social order and its political possibilities. With class no longer regarded as the sole foundation of social life and political practice, a marked shift at the strategic level was undertaken by Hall. This recast socialism as a process of 'democratisation' across all arenas of society, undertaken by an alliance of progressive forces unified ideologically, and centred upon the 'war of position' for cultural leadership conducted within civil society. In this new reality, a new disposition of objective and subjective forces and processes existed as the conjunctural terrain to be mastered by a 'socialism without guarantees'. Here Hall directed the Left towards the expansion of the sites of political antagonism and their associated social forces, the burgeoning terrain of



‘the popular’ with its underdetermined amalgam of experiences, values and subjectivities, as well as the fragmentary dynamics of post-Fordism that were recomposing class relations and fracturing existing political allegiances. The historical task was to ‘learn from Thatcherism’ and its successes upon this terrain how to build a new hegemonic project, beyond the old verities of class politics centred upon the seizure of the state and directed by a centralised party.

We have already seen that Hall offers no substantial empirical work for us to assess the scope and spread of these new phenomena and their impact upon established political agents and perspectives. The new is simply invoked as an inviolable reality the Left cannot ignore. Equally seriously, he does not strategically consider the potential for, and actual relevance to, a socialist political practice of the new political actors and sites he presses us to engage with – that is, contemporary social movements based around issues of gender, racism and the environment, and the terrain of ‘the popular’. We are instead urgently confronted with these novel conjunctural elements that are accorded strategic priority at the expense of existing Left positions, agents and sites. The actual changes underway at the level of organic class relations are not investigated with any thoroughness in Hall’s hasty and sketchy portrayal of its current re (or de) composition and political dealignment, now taken as evidence of its historical incapacity to fulfil past expectations. Instead the new situation is one wherein all progressive forces are ‘democratically equivalent’ in our strategic calculations – although Hall’s focus upon the discursive constitution of political interests, identities and collective subjects, left us with no structural demonstration of the

social and material powers these new allies can wield, that could justify their equivalence with those of class-based powers determined by their leverage over the point of production.

It is in the light of this absence that Ellen Wood's remarks on the general failure of socialist rethinking in the 1980s to produce any convincing "alternative analysis of social power and interest in capitalist society..... (or) strategic reassessment of the social forces that constitute capitalism and its critical strategic targets" become relevant (Wood 1986 p15; p12-15). She also noted that far from assuming 'democratic equivalence' amongst prospective allied progressive forces, we needed to emphasise the central role played by the working class in challenging capitalist power and in embracing other progressive causes, in contrast to the lesser roles played, and challenges launched, by other social movements (Wood op cit p184-186,198-199). And that it had played such a role precisely due to its key *structural* location at the heart of capitalist society, and the resulting powers and interests derived from there – not due to its 'discursive' formation or conjunctural dispositions. Ellen Wood's main target was the work of Laclau and Mouffe, and she did not regard Hall as equally culpable (Wood 1986 p3). I think this was an unwarranted and over-generous concession to Hall; her critiques are equally applicable to his 'hard road to renewal'.

What we are left with here then is a wholesale abandonment of Classical Marxist strategies in the name of an underdeveloped conjunctural description of the contours of the present and a new politics lacking any structural analysis of its agents, sites and forces, or concrete demonstration of how to build a genuine 'counter-hegemonic' movement beyond the mechanisms of 'discursive articulation'. At our most generous, we can say that Hall needs

a far greater sense of theoretical and political discrimination to adjudicate between the agendas and potentials embodied in novel conjunctural phenomena such as new social movements. Less generously, we see Hall here once again rushing uncritically to embrace ‘the new’ and its ‘expansion of the political’, summarily junking well-established Left perspectives; and then, in the wake of a yawning strategic gap, attempting to paper over the cracks by relying on an idealist quick-fix to invoke a potential new collective agent and strategy for the Left.

We can follow Ellen Wood here in noting this alternative falls far short of being a convincing advance over the old ‘class politics’ agenda (Wood 1986 p90-91). There is no comparable coherent conception of ‘ends, means, social processes and historical possibilities’ embodied in a discursive understanding of social life and political practices.

There is a second theme of Hall’s strategy to consider. This is the notion of socialism as being equivalent to a process of ‘democratisation’ across all arenas of social life. Inspired by the contemporary rejection of forms of statist socialism (both Stalinist and Social-Democratic) Hall argued future strategy must be based upon popular-democratic participation in all social arenas, to ensure the real passage of power to the hitherto powerless. We needed to democratise both state and civil society, public bodies and private spaces: “our conception of socialism must be of a society of positions – different places from which we can all begin the reconstruction of society” (Hall 1988A p232). Crucial to this agenda were the arenas and identities of social life classically neglected by the Left – the ‘private’ realms of family and sexual life, the practices of consumption and caring (op cit p171,230-232,280).

Such a recasting of socialism as ‘democratisation’ was one appealing to more than Hall during the 1980s. In her survey of this trend Ellen Wood pointed out some key errors made by its advocates, especially their assumption of the continuities existing between its capitalist and socialist forms. The prevailing belief that a process of extension from one to the other could be launched rested upon a fundamental miscalculation of the class neutrality of liberal democratic institutions, forms and values. Against this implicit reformism, Wood argued that there were basic differences between these two forms of democracy, their divergent degrees of popular-democratic participation and control reflecting distinct class interests. For the forms and institutions of liberal democracy were not class neutral. They had a definite social basis, reflecting capitalist class relations and their powers and interests. To replace them with socialist forms would involve a fundamental rupture, a clash between competing models of democracy and social power, wherein existing ruling class interests would fight to preserve their powers and privileges, up to and including the deployment of coercive force (Wood 1986 p47-53,66-70,130-139,152-153).

In the light of this alternative understanding of the ‘articulation’ of democratic forms with given social relations, Hall’s strategic vision falls far short of what would be required to ‘instantiate’ popular control across all social arenas. We would need a far harder form of politics, based upon class interest, class force and the political organisation of counter-coercive powers in order to replace existing democratic mechanisms with socialist versions. And as we know by now, Hall’s focus on social power in these years was resolutely concerned with its consensual vectors alone, despite his stated belief in the

‘expansion’ of sites of power in contemporary society (see Forgacs 1989 p87). Beyond that it has also been suggested by Ralph Miliband that there would continue to be a need for an alternative state power in socialist society – to defend the revolution, adjudicate between competing claims by distinct groups, etc – implying that the passage of power from state to civil society Hall invoked had definite limits and sites of conflict (Miliband 1985 p15-16). So, the vision of ‘democratisation’ Hall conjures up requires far more in the way of structural analysis and strategic reckoning than he offers if its ‘realisation’ is ever to be a concrete historical possibility.

## 2

### **Agents, Interests and Powers**

The identification of which social actor, or group of actors has the potential to bring about social change is no less troublesome for Hall’s renewal of Marxism. We saw earlier on how he was unable to theoretically secure a space for human agency within his Structuralist-derived frameworks despite wishing to do so. The political preference excluded there has not found a satisfactory home in his strategic calculations either, although he has spent a great deal of analytical effort seeking to show us the power of human actions to shape their social contexts and resist tendencies towards structural determinism and apolitical passivity that previously disfigured Marxist analyses.

His CCCS works take class as the central social category of action, but these are far from illustrations of the historical powers wielded by the working class as agents of change. Instead Hall's attention was directed towards the contemporary processes of class formation that have created distinct and highly visible class fractions whose multiple determinations powered their flamboyant cultural practices (subcultural groupings, black street crime undertaken by 'the wageless'). These practices were not considered as 'political actions' in the classical sense – but they did indicate the variety of 'repertoires of resistance' undertaken within subordinate classes to their social location. And they had definite political effects, in terms of preventing class unification of black and white labour (mugging reinforcing racial divisions). They were also used in ruling class strategies of cultural power to restore social order through a series of sponsored 'moral panics' (on mugging and youth subcultures) that deflected attention from the structural, class basis of society and its contemporary crisis. Hall is in no doubt these class fractions possess political significance.

There is more to say than this however. We need to consider further in what sense these works demonstrate 'political relevance' and are successful in their aim of re-connecting the realms of theory and practice.

Hall invokes tendencies towards class division due to the formation of distinct class fractions as paramount realities in contemporary society. But he has not, as we know, made any attempt to empirically investigate their size and scope as new and divisive forces within subordinate classes. In the absence of this we are equally entitled to suggest that he has not offered any proof that they constitute significant political obstacles to strategies

aiming for class unification. Empirical studies on the condition of black labour made by Miles and Phizacklea paint a different picture, uncovering substantial commonalities between black and white class fractions rather than stressing their enduring separation. And as for youth subcultures, their hold over class subjects as they move along the axes of age relations (that is, grow older) and potential dissipation on the assumption of adulthood is an option Hall never considers in terms of narrowing class divisions. David Harris has argued that Hall pays far too much attention to the political role of subcultures, whose fragility as metaphors of social change was cruelly demonstrated in the next decade, when youth became a victim of social changes (Harris 1992 p82-83,92-95).

Hall also argued that youth subcultures and the black wageless were centrally caught up in contemporary ruling class strategies of cultural power, used as 'moral panics' to offset a crisis of hegemony and create a reactionary popular movement for social restoration, thereby blocking any unified subordinate class challenge or alternative developing. Is this their political significance then – and hence their unmasking by Hall as the 'politically relevant' aspect of his work? Is he a 'decoder' of ruling class strategies as much, or more than, a strategist determined to create an alternative response from below?

Two points need to be made immediately here. Firstly he has (once again) produced no empirical support for this thesis on the decisive political impact upon subordinate classes of such ruling class interventions. We are just supposed to accept this – and then pass on to the damaging political consequences for the Left. As we said earlier on - in relation to the issue of the popularity of Thatcherism - according to the methodology laid down in Hall's most famous CCCS text on the impact of the media, there exists a 'non-identical' relation

between the distinct moments of 'encoding' and 'decoding' in any circuit of communication. Given that, the actual extent to which any given message or content inscribed at the point of production is accepted fully in the realm of consumption must be a matter for empirical investigation. There are 'variant' articulations to be found here, not a unilateral transmission of dominant ideologies (Hall 1973A; 1980C). So, where is the relevant empirical work to support Hall's claims on the impact of these 'moral panics'? Without this his thesis is at best supposition based on contemporary cultural trends in elite culture and electoral results.

Secondly how would it actually be possible to measure empirically the divisive effects of moral panics centred upon youth subcultures and black muggers given the range of other contemporary trends and events Hall sees as being equally involved in creating a general sense of crisis in society? Such an issue of separating out their particular impact and empirically investigating this is one that Hall's resolute avoidance of empirical evidence for his theoretical and political preferences is unlikely to be troubled by. As the efforts of others involved in such investigations have shown, the 'concrete realities' of media impact upon popular audiences are far more complex and contradictory than Hall assumes (see Philo and Miller 2001; Miller 2002 on this issue).

As for the bulk of the working class, we know Hall's CCCS texts show no comparable concern to track their contemporary development, their existing modes of political and cultural organisation and 'repertoires of resistance'. The 'point of production' and its changing forms and class relations is a world Hall has no familiarity with. But were there any contemporary trends indicating a move beyond the economic-corporate state of 'class



consciousness' such as Hall's Gramscian perspective would require? If so, what, and how could they be developed further? If not, what strategies could be put in place to encourage this dynamic? We find no answers to these questions in Hall's work. The contrast with the pre-prison writings of Gramsci on contemporary developments in the Italian economy and its class relations after the 1914-18 war is telling here. Could we even imagine Hall in a 'Factory Council' type movement, as an activist involved on the ground on a day-to-day basis? Equally damning is his neglect of contemporaneous work investigating the potential for such a dynamic in a new trade unionism, going beyond its traditional limited economic agenda to raise issues of workers control over production, planning, etc (Coates and Topham 1974; Wainwright and Elliott 1982). More concretely, was Hall ever active within the unions in the Higher Education sector he worked within? If not, why?

Another relevant criticism to be levelled at Hall's claims for the 'political relevance' of his works is their complete failure to pose the strategic question of how to unify the subordinate classes (whatever their empirical disposition and configuration). We know black and white labour can be divided by racist practices and ideologies. So how can we tackle them on the grounds of their daily lived realities as experienced by the class? The only response Hall has to offer is to launch anti-racist interventions within the institutions of the mass media. Surely we need more than this – say strategies directed at the very organisations and institutions they daily encounter in social, political and economic arenas? The example of Gramsci's recommendations to unify proletariat and peasantry in post-1918 Italy is more politically relevant and persuasive to us here than Hall's 'cultural politics'.

CCCS strove, according to Hall, to forge external links with ‘new and emergent’ social forces in contemporary society. We have just seen their neglect of well-established class forces and their potential – so, what hope for the youth subcultures and black wageless? Are they ‘social forces’ – if so, what powers do they possess to enact change, what interests drive them on? Hall has no answer, because their cultural practices embody no political agenda. Or, more likely, are they better understood as novel social phenomena, theoretically comprehended by him in a display of intellectual sophistication that has not actually demonstrated their ‘political significance’ and hence is not itself especially ‘politically relevant’? There has been an extensive body of theoretical labour waged on marginal social phenomena. In the process Hall has developed a complex model for reading cultures, their values and practices, in terms of their historically specific articulation with class relations and dynamics of cultural power. But would it not have been more politically useful to forge such a framework in relation to the core of the working class and its political potential, instead of lavishing attention on ephemeral and structurally powerless social categories?

The political relevance of Hall’s CCCS works thus remains unproven. He claimed they had political significance – examining subcultures and the black wageless as socially divisive agents in struggles from below, and as ideological mobilisers for reactionary ruling class strategies from above. Neither aspect was empirically demonstrated. On the other side of the coin – how to strategically respond to the contemporary disposition of social forces and forge class unity – Hall had effectively nothing to contribute, beyond over-exaggerating the extent of class divisions and licensing political passivity. He invoked the example of

Gramsci as a guide to his own efforts – but they represent a severely limited notion of ‘hegemonic politics’ that Gramsci would surely have trouble recognising as akin to his own practice.

The works of the 1980s invoked a different agency as the key to socialist transformation. Here we were confronted by an increasingly complex and plural social order, with its array of progressive forces that are ‘democratically equivalent’ in terms of their relevance to socialist politics, awaiting ideological unification. Now this altered the terms of the political game substantially according to Hall. And yet, as we will demonstrate below, some rather familiar and enduring problems reside within this alternative solution to the question of strategy in a social order beyond ‘class reductionism’.

It comes as no surprise to learn that Hall has not offered any sustained structural analysis or empirical investigation into the contours of this new matrix of social relations and antagonisms. There is an important strategic consequence. We have *no* idea of the combination of structural constraints and opportunities they afford to political projects, nor of the social forces and interests thereby produced. In effect, we are running blindly towards a future relying only upon the magical powers of discursive articulation to create social interests, identities and collective subjects, each ‘democratically equivalent’ to the others. This is clearly not what Hall envisaged when reclaiming the links between theory and practice in opposition to Althusser. Here we have a new theory that tells us almost *nothing* about the conditions of political possibility in the given conjuncture.

If we resist this idealist trajectory and its magically harmonious outcomes, and insist upon addressing the enduring material and structural bases of political projects and their forces, a different and less pliable strategic agenda comes into view. Firstly we must consider the distinct and varying degrees of structural power each of these potential progressive allies wields by virtue of its social, material location in the new social world Hall invokes. What is readily apparent here is the insufficiency of relying on abstract notions of ‘democratic equivalence’ among prospective allies. Their political potentials are obviously variable, as Ellen Wood pointed out in her defence of the core role for class in socialist strategy. Given that, there remains a necessary process of strategic calculation and calibration to be undertaken, concerning the centrality, positioning and ordering of these forces in any future alliance. There are some difficult and substantive issues of political organisation and negotiation to confront, beyond the optic of discursive articulation. Hall’s theoretical failure to discriminate between the powers of different social forces is by now however a familiar feature of his work for us.

No less troublesome is the prospect of conflicting needs, interests and agendas this array of new agents could bring to our strategic reckoning, once we admit their material, structural generation in distinct social arenas and relations. Hall’s discursive vision of their creation simply sidesteps these problems and their forcing onto our strategic agenda issues of how to build political organisations and mechanisms of negotiation to take them into account. Are we really to believe that feminist, anti-racist and class based forces will all stand neatly aligned solely by virtue of a discursive harmonisation? What about the differences in the scope of their political concerns – are they remediable within capitalist social relations, or socialist ones, or even beyond both?

Suppose we now shift our focus and come to consider the historical ‘articulations’ that are currently in place between these new social movements and their surrounding social context. It is evident that strong links exist between new struggles over the future of the environment, racism and gender inequalities and the core social relations of production in capitalist society. Indeed Hall’s work in *Policing The Crisis* stands as one such example of these articulations. Would it not strategically be the case then, that the long-established class struggles waged against this determining social context by the working class were of central importance in conducting contemporary struggles against environmental destruction, racism, et al? Does the latter not require the structural powers and capacities held by the former as a *necessary if not sufficient condition* of realising its aims? In other words, the historical articulation of those social tendencies against which the ‘new social movements’ protest with the capitalist mode of production and its ‘concrete conjunctures’ implies a necessary linkage of such movements with the core aim of socialism, the abolition of class exploitation through class struggle. This is a conclusion absent from Hall’s vision of ‘democratic equivalence’ and discursive articulation.

One further consequence of Hall’s position is the lack of any necessary social basis to socialist strategy and its agents. Recasting political representation as a process wholly constituting the identities and interests of collective subjects leads us to a vision of socialism unable to specify its links to any surrounding social context and the material determinations and constraints that historically anchored and powered its political practices. We have no sense of any definite and delimited content that make socialism a particular political option, prosecuted by a socially determined agent with relevant powers, interests and capacities (Wood 1986 p14-15,60-61,198-199). And once we detach, or

substantially downgrade, the centrality of class to socialist strategy, it can easily become an indeterminate and free-floating empty vessel without any viable agency to undertake strategies of social transformation (Wood op cit p90-91). This is of course precisely where Hall leads us with his rewriting of socialism.

It also underpins his willingness to seemingly accept all and any currently popular attitudes, movements and trends as relevant to the socialist project (Live Aid, sport and exercise, public concerns on health are cited in *The Hard Road To Renewal*), regardless of their appropriateness, potential conflict with existing interests and agendas or possession of structural powers. Thus, for example, exactly how are popular trends for exercise of central importance to socialism, displacing existing class-based concerns for equality and democratic power? What leverage could such a 'fashion' have to enhance the struggle for a redefined socialism – beyond its potential as a new electoral constituency? None I would suggest. It seems that for Hall the socialist cause can be rearticulated at will in terms of its particular goals, agents and interests, according to historically effective practices of discursive articulation. There remain no discernible material and historical constraints operative here on the political realm. It appears now to be a fully autonomous rather than 'relatively autonomous' terrain, in defiance of Hall's initial understanding of the social formation.

By way of conclusion then, we can see that Hall's works of the 1980s are searching for a new collective agent beyond that of class without ever reaching any convincing conclusions. Relying upon a plurality of new social movements ideologically produced as a collective will screened out the enduring material and social determinants operating to

define and delimit the ends and means of socialist political practice. This includes the historical articulation of such trends and forces with central class relations and struggles over capitalism itself. Socialist strategy has a necessary social base in core class relations and their historically variable mixtures of structural constraints and opportunities. To replace this with a vision of ideologically hailed forces and subjectivities left us with no coherent basis on which to proceed in the realm of political practice. We now have no social base, and the interests, powers and capacities flowing from it, no 'material infrastructure' to ground our political alternative. The 'plural social order' Hall invokes has received neither the theoretical investigation nor strategic calculation required to displace Classical Marxist perspectives.

### **3**

## **Sites and Forms of Political Practice**

In the history of socialist political practice hitherto, the state and the political party have played predominant roles as major site and form for concerted collective action to be directed through and towards. Hall's concerns lay elsewhere. He identified the realm of cultural struggle and its institutional locations within civil society as the main site for political intervention, taking place beyond any clearly defined party-political organisation or form. In this he claimed to be acting in the spirit of Gramsci, conducting the 'war of

position' for hegemonic leadership in the increasingly complex institutional terrain of civil society found in advanced capitalism. We were decidedly beyond the Classical Marxist revolutionary assault on the state scenario that the far Left remains wedded to. The aspirations of Hall and CCCS were to emulate the Gramscian model of the 'organic intellectual' in these new social conditions. The success of this historical reworking is the subject of our investigation in this section.

Dennis Dworkin describes Hall's CCCS works as attempts to comprehend an external dynamic of social and political polarisation unfolding in British capitalism after '1968'. They address "both the emergence of subcultural practices and radical practices and the means by which the dominant ideological structures defined and defused them" (Dworkin 1997 p149). This history of 'social action and reaction' was focused primarily upon the cultural terrain, but in both his media analyses and those on youth subcultures, Hall stressed the degree of historical open-endedness and political potential embedded in these cultural forms. We were not watching the latest episode in some eternally recurring dominant ideology. Instead cultural relations, forms and institutions were marked by contradictory processes of reproduction and contestation. The political point of this reading is to highlight their availability as arenas for Left political and cultural intervention, as 'sites of and stakes in class struggle'. We can, and indeed must, mobilise upon such terrains in order to challenge prevailing definitions and values, offer alternative perspectives and build a new socialist culture and collective will after the manner of Gramsci.



Now Hall refers more than once to the scope for intervention within the institutions of the mass media. He later went on to discuss the possibilities for anti-racist cultural strategies within this domain – and, following his departure from CCCS, was himself present on our television screens in Open University programmes he either appeared in or helped craft. Is this a suitable or successful venture for the Left to emulate? Judged from the perspective of the present, we might consider that the subsequent reconfiguration of mass media in advanced capitalist societies powered by the introduction of new technologies (digital, satellite, cable) and trends towards economic deregulation have blown away the prospects Hall held out for us.

The economic forces and dynamics of contemporary capitalism have effectively diminished the vectors of this ‘war of position’, an unexpected return of that very reductionism Hall pressed the Left to free itself from! As contemporary critics of mass media output recognise, the current prevailing diet of celebrity, sensationalism and crude, materialistic programmes (game shows for money, house and garden improvements, buying and selling for profits, shopping channels, etc) is a cultural landscape in which politically and culturally challenging material is, at best, pressed to the margins when not ghettoised on minority channels (Philo and Miller 2001). The potential for Left cultural intervention here seems to be disproportionate to the costs of time, effort and resources involved in producing such fare. We may be better off looking elsewhere strategically, *beyond* the dominant cultural institutions.

Another point to consider here is the charge of implicit reformism that has been classically made against Gramscian strategies of ‘war of position’ by more traditional Marxist

approaches. It is important to recognise that Hall and the CCCS are not operating alone in switching our attention to cultural struggles and the prioritisation of the ‘war of position’ in civil society. This is a much wider trend closely associated with the rise of ‘Eurocommunism’ and its spread across Communist Parties in advanced capitalist societies in the 1960s and 70s. As described by David Forgacs in relation to its reception in Britain, the ‘turn to Eurocommunism’ involved recasting the socialist project as a ‘long march’ through the institutions of capitalist society (rather than a violent, revolutionary ‘break’ with its forms) requiring the prosecution of class struggle at all levels of society – including the cultural institutions of the superstructures (Forgacs 1989 p80-82). He went on to note that Hall had both institutional and theoretical links to this political shift in the approach of the CPGB.

“Hall has never been a CP member, but he has operated since the mid 70s very much in the CULs [the ‘Communist University of London’, to whose annual events Hall presented his reinterpretations of Marx’s views on the social formation and class formation already covered] and Marxism Today [the revisionist journal of the CPGB’s Eurocommunist wing, on whose editorial board Hall sat] and he has been a powerful influence upon the Party” (Forgacs 1989 p83).

Now this whole trajectory has long been diagnosed as a modern-day reformism for its de facto assumption of the availability of existing state forms as open to use by socialist projects, ignoring their links to capitalist class interests and its likely deployment of coercive force to defend any challenge to these powers (Anderson 1980 p194-197; Mandel 1978). We saw earlier on that its downgrading of the direct assault on state power, the ‘war of manoeuvre’ in favour of a prolonged positional war in civil society, reducing socialism

to a process of ideological conversion, was one licensed by the ambiguities of Gramsci's analysis of social power in his Prison Notebooks. Hall has never addressed this well known critique and the consequences it holds for Left strategic reckoning – although in the name of that 'harsh dose of realism' he claims the Left actually needs, one he allegedly goes on to provide for the Left in his Thatcherism analysis, he would do well to swallow his own medicine here. (For an attempted response to this critique see Simon 1982).

Instead his works of the 1980s take this concern for cultural intervention within civil society still further. Inspired by the example of Ernesto Laclau, Hall considered the moment of cultural power to be ever more salient in a new social order traversed by multiple social antagonisms and forces. The only political option to master this new configuration lay in their ideological rearticulation and unification in an 'historic bloc', politically constructed and mobilised as a new national-popular collective will. A new, multi-dimensional 'war of position' was needed strategically to tackle this reality, struggling on many fronts at once to remake society, including the complex terrain of the modern state (Hall 1996F p426-430).

We have already encountered Hall's preoccupations with 'the popular' as a key arena for political intervention. Designed to challenge Thatcherism's deep penetration into this terrain (one never empirically proven) Hall's lessons for the Left on connecting with currently popular attitudes and 'rearticulating' them into its own evolving project contained a number of unwelcome implications. Let us bring these together here, in relation to a

concrete example Hall discusses in *The Hard Road To Renewal* - that is, the popular appreciation of the market.

He argued that a new set of cultural attitudes existed amongst the popular masses following the spread of consumer capitalism in post-war Britain. There was a new awareness of the choice and capacities for experimentation afforded by the market which has become an “expansive popular system” producing new social experiences and expectations (Hall 1988A p215). The Left had not recognised this cultural shift, unlike Thatcherism, which had appropriated such concerns for its own free-market solution. The Left must however do so in order to ever regain a foothold in popular life (op cit p211-219,228-230).

What does this entail strategically? A number of searching questions need to be asked of Hall’s advocacy of the market. Firstly exactly how can these popular trends be articulated to a socialist project without undermining its classical concerns for equality, socially determined production and popular control over the economic realm? Isn’t the market precisely a social institution, resting on a definite set of social relations, that runs in diametrically opposed directions – that anarchic, divisive force recognised in classical Marxist theory and much other Left political economy? There is here a chasing after conjuncturally prevalent features that can only dilute the core priorities of socialism, a tendency we have seen displayed in Hall’s works a number of times already.

Secondly, even if we can overcome these barriers to its recruitment, how will we be able to judge its positioning and relative importance in a socialist strategy in relation to the other causes and values such a movement will embrace? And what sort of conflicts of interest and agendas will be produced through the incorporation of such a contentious social

institution within socialist strategy? Hall's advocacy of the market illustrates sharply the stark absence of any strategic reckoning or prioritisation of which popular concerns are *relevant* to socialist politics.

Finally, what empirical evidence does Hall offer in support of his thesis on the cultural appreciation of the market by the popular masses? It is certainly the predominant provider of goods and services in a capitalist society. But does this mean it is wholeheartedly endorsed by its captive consumers or simply accepted as the only option? We are never in a position to find out given Hall's lack of concern to empirically ground his theoretical and political preferences for 'the popular' as new arena for Left intervention.

In sum then, Hall's failure to address any of these issues leaves us unconvinced by his attempted 'articulation' of socialism and the market. In terms of the larger picture, we are equally entitled to reject his displacement of class relations and classical agendas for a focus on 'popular-democratic' traditions, of allegedly indeterminate character and ever-open to political exploitation. The problems raised by Hall's alternative are simply too large and intractable to be a plausible future site for Left intervention.

A second dimension of Hall's strategy is the centrality of 'cultural politics'. Now we have seen the peculiar form this takes in his political vision. Beneath the conceptual cover of Gramscian terminology, Hall offered a profoundly academicist mode of intervention restricted to an individualised relay of 'critical knowledge' within the walls of the academy, or transmitted via the mass media. This activity was divorced from any articulation with concrete modes of political organisation or institutional bases and from

any connection with the daily realities of oppressed groups and the range of organisational and institutional frameworks they inhabit. Because of this dual disarticulation, Hall's practice was dangerously *unregulated*, wholly unconcerned with the concrete structural barriers and options that any cultural strategy aiming to politically intervene upon the grounds of the given social and material conditions framing the lives of contemporary progressive forces would surely confront. In their absence he was free to expand the salience of 'cultural politics' within Left strategies to encompass its horizons in full. Confined to the academic ghetto of Cultural Studies, this form of 'cultural politics' nonetheless insisted upon its political significance and relevance. Quite what commonalities it shared with its motivating Gramscian vision of the 'organic intellectual' is difficult to appreciate – as David Harris notes, Gramsci envisaged the political and cultural development of the proletariat occurring outside bourgeois institutions in popular-democratic forms (Harris 1992 p27). So when David Forgacs comments on Hall's institutional links with the CPGB and its Eurocommunist wing, we must reply that this has never been based upon Hall's assumption of the role of political activist daily engaged with the lives and material conditions of his preferred constituencies (1).

There is an illuminating debate upon the contours and sites of 'cultural politics' contained in the Gilroy et al collection of articles on Hall's career, indicating some of the variance contained within this term. Henry Giroux offers a spirited defence of Hall's model (referring to his post-Marxist works), stressing its pedagogical role in contemporary radical politics. He argues that the inextricable links between culture and power define this terrain as one of extensive struggles, wherein agents and political projects are formed and

re-formed through the provision of resources used to learn and re-learn about self, others and the wider world. It offers possibilities for individuals to challenge and change their determining circumstances, once pedagogical interventions contesting dominant representations and outlining alternative perspectives are put into play via strategies of cultural struggle undertaken by radical political practice. For Hall cultural pedagogy is a form of practical politics, one able to be undertaken from a variety of institutional sites including a society's dominant institutions (Giroux 2000 p134-145).

All of the above dimensions of cultural struggle are well said here, with the exception of the question of their siting. Once again, Gramsci's example shows us the vast difference between Hall's abstract vision and a concrete political intervention. In considering 'The Southern Question', that is, the problem of allying proletariat and peasantry as a revolutionary force in Italy, Gramsci explicitly addressed the need to culturally intervene and break the hold of dominant Catholic representations over the peasantry. The PCI had to develop alternative identifications, stressing their revolutionary potential and common interests with the workers against contemporary divisive ideologies. Such a 'cultural politics' was not to be practised in academic sites however. It required daily involvement *within* peasant organisations by party activists, a strategy inserted into their everyday milieu and itself only part of a larger, more global hegemonic politics to transform their 'conditions of existence' which embraced organisational and economic imperatives too – for example, the formation of autonomous peasant bodies (Gramsci 1978 p354-356,362-364,444-449,454-462).

This illustrates the huge gulf separating Gramsci's vision of the 'organic intellectual' from Hall's interpretation. In the Prison Notebooks he called for a new type of engaged intellectual practice beyond academicism:-

"The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence...but in active participation in practical life, as constructor, organiser, 'permanent persuader' and not just a simple orator" (Gramsci 1971 p10).

Later on, Gramsci explicitly proposed the political party, not the academy, as the best medium for the development of such intellectuals – and stressed the role the party must play in the formation of new strata from amongst the masses themselves, by virtue of daily involvement within their organisations of its activists (Gramsci 1971 p15-16 and p204-205, 334-335, 340-341 respectively). This is a perspective far beyond Hall's limited cultural pedagogy, taking cultural politics from academy and mass media to the masses immediate workplace and community settings (2). As Francis Mulhern says, Hall offers only a new form of *existing* academic intervention in place of any fully-fledged alternative: "the moralised form of a partisan popular tendency within the field of the traditional" (Mulhern 2000 p147; p145-149).

The issue of connecting cultural politics to forces beyond the academy is raised in a different form in the contribution of Jordan and Weedon to the Gilroy et al collection. Their work shows us the distance of Hall's formal commitments (aligning CCCS with new and emergent social forces) from his actual academic practice, in relation to a project for 'cultural democracy' undertaken within a working class community (the dockland area of Tiger Bay in Cardiff). Here a local organisation was established to help promote the production of new understandings of community life – "to create a space for the production of alternative histories, identities and representations of life" (Jordan and Weedon 2000



p168). This included challenging dominant interpretations of the community fixated upon its alleged criminality and exotic inter-racial mix, and taken as different from the rest of the surrounding city. Such a challenge was, in turn, only possible by gaining access to the means of alternative cultural production, allowing the formation of counter-hegemonic narratives and identifications. In the view of Jordan and Weedon, this venture successfully recovered the racial harmony present within the community and re-presented it as a potential model for wider social change (op cit p166-175).

That example is clearly a long way from the cultural politics undertaken by Gramsci and the PCI as part of its more global strategic intervention. However the relocation of cultural politics from academy to community does offer a more hopeful way forward than Hall's cultural pedagogy. It also takes place outside the confines of those dominant institutions (mass media, university) that Hall continues to insist allow space for the production of alternative cultural pedagogies. Even if the space was there, the mode of interaction between individual academic and audience (immediately present or 'mediated') is not the same as that found in community settings or party - mass relations at their best, where more collective and reciprocal forms of learning and activity can flourish.

This is part of the potential contained in the work of Paulo Freire and his concrete political interventions to encourage new radical pedagogies and processes of cultural change. The perspective of Freire has been developed and deployed in radically different Third World settings as a literacy programme designed to link literacy acquisition to counter-hegemonic cultural awareness. It proceeds on the basis of community based 'culture circles' that seek to 'problematise' and raise concerns over current concrete 'conditions of existence', with a view to breaking enduring 'cultures of silence' and encouraging historical consciousness of

social life. Here the role of culture as a formative power in social life is recognised – but the political strategy flowing from this recognition is one definitely located outside a society's dominant institutions and based upon social relations of dialogue rather than the monologic transmission of knowledge that predominates in media and academic settings. I would suggest that a sensitive historical translation of this perspective upon cultural power and pedagogy has more to offer as a model to work from than Hall's much more visible and highly regarded practice (on Freire see the collection of articles edited by Robert Mackie 1980; for applications of his work see Archer and Costello 1990). Culture and cultural politics matter – but not in the form they have been appropriated by Hall, and not to the extent that they supplant other long-established modes of social power and political practice.

The third and final aspect of this strategy we must consider is the notion of socialism as a 'war of position'. Here Hall saw the increasing complexity and proliferation of social relations in modern society as altering profoundly the strategic calculations of the Left. Instead of a single class force directly confronting the state as an organ of ruling class power to be seized and smashed, there was now a complex matrix of relations of power and antagonism to be mastered, both within the heterogeneous institutions of civil society and upon the expanded and differentiated terrain of the modern state.

"The effect is to multiply and proliferate the various fronts of politics.....The different fronts of struggle are the various sites of political and social antagonism and constitute the objects of modern politics" (Hall 1996F p430; see also p426-430 and Hall 1988A p168-169,225-227).

Having outlined such an expansive agenda for the Left, we must first recall there has been no substantial structural analysis made by Hall to map this new complex terrain of social relations. To repeat, we are theoretically running blindly towards the future here – hardly the sort of ‘concrete analysis of concrete situations’ Hall described as the goal of Marxist analysis! In its place we have an invocation of social change whose results can apparently be dealt with through the mechanisms of discursive articulation and creation. Indeed, despite all Hall’s talk of complex realities requiring equally complex strategies to master their variety and ‘differentiatedness’, all he has to offer is one favoured option of ideological intervention and contestation. Even the material and institutional bases on which such strategies could be launched – and their determining impact on the content of ‘rearticulation’ – are absent from our view.

Hall stresses the Left has failed to keep up with the nature of the modern state. Its array of functions, internal configuration and relationship with the forces of civil society are now far beyond the old mantra of ‘class instrument’ whose coercive power secures ruling class domination. Instead it is a complex formation, an arena of different social contestations requiring a variable and plural strategic response (Hall 1996F p429). Well, what does Hall offer to meet this new challenge? Predictably enough we are told about the need for cultural intervention to address the ‘ethical functions’ the expanded state now discharges, without any recognition of the continuing recourse to coercive and administrative powers it demonstrates. And the class basis of this coercive state power has not gone away just because Hall’s theoretical interests have altered; it remains a definite and socially

determined blockage to any strategy of socialist transformation. The one-dimensionality of Hall's response is glaringly insufficient.

Finally, there is the array of new social movements emerging in civil society, beyond the spheres of traditional politics, that Hall encourages socialist strategy to address. We know by now that he does not offer any structural analysis of these social phenomena, to discover and demonstrate their strategic leverage and potential to a Left politics. If we take one example given of this new trend in *The Hard Road To Renewal*, that of 'Live Aid', other relevant concerns come into view. According to Hall, this movement successfully combined politics and popular culture so as to mobilise new political forces (especially among the young). It offered "a rare and powerful crossover between politics and culture" becoming "one of the great popular movements of our time" (Hall 1988A p254 and p251 respectively). Additionally it also sought to involve ordinary people as active participants rather than passive recipients of Left programmes handed down by the Party or State – here in the guise of charity donors or fun-runners. In sum, it illustrated the power of civil society-based projects that the Left should embrace and align to its own project (op cit p256-258).

Now we need to make some important distinctions here. 'Active participation' in the form of charity donation or sports events is hardly equivalent to the goal of 'popular-democratic participation in the determination of social life' Hall's anti-statist socialist vision aspires to. Indeed, it is not even a necessary step along the way, whatever the positive aspirations it evokes in academic bystanders. As for the mobilisation of new political forces, the appeal

to youth through its ‘crossover’ into popular culture is hardly a model we should seek to emulate. As later efforts were to show (Billy Bragg and Red Wedge), pop music and progressive politics are not easy bedfellows. I think the scope for political mobilisation Hall invokes here is seriously overdrawn. We can note however his enduring concern with the ‘radicalisation of youth’ surfacing once again here, part of an unbroken line stretching back through the black wageless and youth subcultures to the early humanist Marxist endorsement of CND and its teenage avant-garde. What the ‘Live Aid’ phenomenon may show is less the substantive power of civil society projects to bring about or contribute to fundamental social change, than Hall’s enduring celebration (and over-inflation) of novel cultural phenomena as dramatically significant. Was it really “one of the great popular movements of our time”? We must doubt that verdict. There were then, and remain now, more fundamental and strategically powerful sites for Left political intervention (3).

## 4

### **The Critical World of Stuart Hall**

From the foregoing discussion it is all too evident that Stuart Hall has failed to reconnect the realms of theory and political practice in this reworking of Marxism. Neither the ‘complex class reductionist’ works carried out at CCCS nor the later examination of a ‘plural social order’ have provided a convincing argument securing his self-conception as a practically engaged ‘organic intellectual’.

Those of the CCCS period offer an implicit vision of class-based transformation perpetually frustrated by conjuncturally divisive cultural practices of new class fractions. The only avenue of likely advance Hall describes is one of cultural intervention within the dominant institutions of the mass media to contest given representations and interpretations of the social world. Their successor explicitly displaced the Classical Marxist focus upon class, party and state with a new strategic agenda of progressive social alliances organised in the realm of ideology upon the terrains of civil society. This palpably lacked any coherence to qualify as an integrated strategy supplanting the old version. In the words of Ellen Wood it could not match the panoramic conception of “ends, means, social processes and historical possibilities” that traditional concerns for the abolition of class exploitation through class struggle displayed (Wood 1986 p90-91).

By way of conclusion, I want to consider two further issues relating to Hall’s ‘politically engaged’ critical work – that of his massive influence within the realm of critical academia as an exemplar of politically relevant theorising, and his relationship to the Labour Party.

Although Hall’s work on Thatcherism and its challenge to the Left is critical of Labour’s traditionalist Left perspectives (prioritising class, party and state along reformist lines) he did place his own alternative in relation to debates on socialist rethinking unfolding in the 1980s within the Party. For Hall this rethinking, prompted by successive electoral defeats, had not gone far enough. Labour needed to accept that the current ‘crisis of Labourism’ was a terminal condition – and move to fully address new realities of class decomposition

and dealignment, new social antagonisms, the importance of cultural politics, etc (Hall 1988A p1-2,11-15,170-173,196-209,239-250).

We are well aware by now of the insufficiencies of his own 'hard road to renewal'. But what of the nature of his relationship to the Labour Party? Hall was never a party member, still less an activist, preferring instead the role of a sympathetic critic watching from the academic sidelines. In this his critical practice recalls the earlier positioning he adopted in the works of the New Left period – pressing the Left to engage with contemporary social and cultural changes but refusing to endorse the revisionist rewriting of Labour strategy then undertaken by Crosland (see Hall 1960 and his retrospective verdict in Hall 1989A). There is little evidence of Hall's influence on Labour strategy and policy either during the heyday, or following the demise, of the New Left. Has a similar fate now befallen his recommendations of the 1980s? For the actual contours of Labour's rethinking during the next decade or so saw it ever more fatally swing to the right, swallowing the Thatcherite agenda whole, and neglecting those issues of the 'expansion of politics' Hall wanted it to engage with. The reality of New Labour is that it failed to construct an alternative future to Thatcherism – as Hall was later bitterly to acknowledge in his article 'The Great Moving Nowhere Show' (Hall 1998A). What it certainly has done however is place increasing stress upon the role of the free market as preferential provider of goods and services – a concern that Hall *did* want the Left to address. We may conclude then that there is a certain ambiguity in Hall's relationship to New Labour, one his critique of its years in government glosses over.

No such ambiguities or arms-length relationships are to be found in our second area for discussion – the substantial influence Hall’s critical practice has enjoyed within the academy, and especially in the arena of the discipline he helped found, cultural studies.

What accounts for the reverence with which his work has been received here, and its status as ‘politically relevant’? There are a number of points we can consider here as contributing factors.

To begin with there is Hall’s particular style of theorising. He is ever-keen to summon up a wide array of theoretical sources and influences, placing their concerns in relation to his own on-going investigations into the nature of culture, ideology and hegemony (see the glowing comments by Lawrence Grossberg and John Fiske in Morley and Chen 1996 p151-153 and p212 respectively). We must assume this mastery lends itself to a substantial degree of prestige and pedagogical influence upon followers.

Beyond this display of theoretical sophistication there lies Hall’s preferential way of positioning the contributions of others to current debates in terms of their opposite strengths and weaknesses, which he then ‘synthesises’ in charting a middle way between these alternatives. David Harris has commented upon the conventional nature of this academic rhetorical strategy in relation to the whole of CCCS output in its heyday, and we must again assume Hall’s influence here was significant (Harris 1992 p7-10). In setting up debates in such a way Hall always casts himself as the reasonable, balanced mid-point, sifting the merits and drawbacks of the antagonists to leave himself ‘naturally’, as it were, in the best position. His famous reading of the theoretical development of Cultural Studies as a clash between the paradigms of Culturalism and Structuralism, which resolves itself into his own Gramscian-inspired synthesis and platform for future advance is a classic



instance of this rhetorical style (Hall 1980B). Others we have encountered in our examination of his 'complex Marxism' are found in the reading of Marx's 1857 Introduction, the analysis of racially-structured social formations, and the survey of media analysis that clears the ground for his 'encoding – decoding' model.

In his later, post-Marxist work Hall's interventions in the debates upon post-modernism and globalisation show similar dispositions (see Hall 1996A on the former). Even in his earliest period, the position he adopted vis-à-vis post-war social and cultural changes stood as a 'third way' between uncritical advocates of a new consumer society and Leftist denials of any changes to the nature of capitalism (as recalled in Hall 1989A). Here then is another characteristic theoretical disposition Hall displays throughout his intellectual career, recurring within radically different theoretical frameworks and in relation to distinct objects of analysis (4).

Another feature to note concerns Hall's pedagogical role within CCCS as its leading theorist and 'critical navigator' plotting the boundaries of, and agenda for, a new academic discipline. This foundational role led to his massive influence over the initial cohort of students within Cultural Studies, a group that later became some of its leading academic lights as the discipline expanded dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s – the names of David Morley, Angela McRobbie, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige and Lawrence Grossberg are all relevant here (for a fuller listing see Harris 1992 p xi). Hall's much-praised open-ended commitment to theorising and its ever-changing horizons should also be kept in mind. He has continued to respond theoretically to the work of ex-students who have gone on to chart new theoretical directions (for example the work of Allon White and Paul Gilroy), a 'reciprocal arrangement' that continually re-replaces Hall at the cutting edge of critical

academia (on the work of Allon White see Hall 1996E). The collective style of academic production Hall favoured at both CCCS and the Open University has surely enhanced the spread of his influence too, although this is by no means to downplay the genuine and salutary efforts he has made here to break from individualised modes of knowledge production (see Hall 1980A p43-45). We can only regret this turn to collective alternatives was one restricted to an academic setting and not transplanted to community settings, where possibilities for a more 'dialogic' practice would be available and links made to progressive forces in their everyday milieu.

Despite all this, can we claim 'political relevance' for this body of work? According to the standards Hall laid down at the outset of his attempt to renew Marxism, in opposition to Althusserianism and as the critical agenda to be followed at CCCS, we must say no. There is no active political intervention evident to support such a claim. The political relevance of Hall's works is strictly confined to the academic arena. Here dominant cultural conceptions can be challenged, alternatives suggested, and strategies deduced that lay bare their cultural mechanics in the arena of hegemonic politics. As we know, a host of followers have gone much further here, decoding the political significance of cultural practices on the terrain of the popular. Hall has cast doubt over the populist assumptions contained in some of this work – but he cannot deny his role as initial inspiration for such a general approach!

Chris Rojek has recently described Hall's role as that of an engaged intellectual, 'articulating contradictions in the body politic conducive to social change', in place of Hall's unconvincing grand claims for himself as a modern-day 'organic intellectual' (Rojek

2003 p2,76-83). Aside from the problematic issue of the validity of Hall's actual analyses, we must stress this would be an insufficient role for Hall to adopt *according to his own criteria*. He was aspiring to be far more than a critical academic, linking the work of CCCS to new social forces. The failure to do so, or even identify convincing agencies capable of effecting social change, is a damning verdict to record but one that is unavoidable. In an interview with Lawrence Grossberg, Hall described his notion of articulation as one linking ideas and social forces in a political project that lacks any historical necessity or guarantees. It is a model akin to that of an articulated lorry: "a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another" (Hall 1996A p141; originally written in 1986). If we apply that notion to his own works, we are presented with a theoretical cab (or even two) running unencumbered by any popular or collective trailer positioned behind it. In his own terms it must therefore be historically redundant. A few lines later in the same interview Hall says we must ask 'under what circumstances can a connection be forged or made '. Quite so; we are still waiting for a description of these circumstances, the conditions of political possibility, that haunt – untheorised – his 'hard road to renewal'. In their absence, Hall finds himself consigned to the hard shoulder rather than actually moving along such a road!

## Notes

1. This distancing from the role of organic intellectual is also reflected in the absence within Hall's works of the huge impact of the contemporary disintegration of the CPGB on the lives of its members. Equally to the point, if Hall did wish to move his work closer to tasks of 'public education', one of the stated reasons for leaving CCCS to join the OU, why did he not choose an academic setting with far closer links to the lives of oppressed groups – say trade union colleges or Ruskin? I think this is another undeniable reflection of his distance from any affiliation with class-based politics we have already noted.
2. It is apparent from this that the historical and contemporary educational activities carried out by, for example, the CPGB could not be simply *replaced* by interventions within the mass media. Symptomatically, Hall has had nothing to say on the educational strategies of the Party despite its evident impact upon the cultural formation of generation of activists. Was it a model for his own practice, or not? And if not, why?
3. Far greater and more implausible claims for the political significance of popular cultural trends and pastimes were to follow in Hall's favoured discipline of cultural studies. On this 'academic sideshow' see the critical comments of Jim McGuigan, David Harris, Todd Gitlin and Francis Mulhern. I must also mention here my own favourite examples of this dynamic, in relation to pop music – the efforts of Paul Willis and Richard Middleton, whose arguments on pop music as a political force simply beggar belief (Willis 1990; Middleton 1990).
4. Hall also presented his Thatcherism analysis as a similar mid-point between traditional Left economic reductionism and the discursive approach of Laclau and Mouffe. We have shown here that this is a misleading claim. Beneath the formal distancing Hall has swallowed far too much of the idealist paradigm of 'discursive articulation' to distinguish his concrete analysis from Laclau and Mouffe's perspective.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have reached the end of a long and involved journey. In this final chapter I want to retrace my steps and summarise the main findings of my investigations. Having done so, I will then pass on to consider some of the analytical consequences of my critique of Hall's works, and also the historical relevance of Marxism in the contemporary 'concrete situation'.

### 1

#### **Hall and Marxism: a Reckoning**

What then can we say about Hall's overall efforts to renew Marxism? I think it is apparent that Hall is far better at diagnosing certain problems found within this tradition of theory and practice than in supplying effective remedies to guide its renewal. He has rightly pointed out its tendencies towards a form of structural determinism, eternally fixing the parameters of Left analysis and strategy solely to the vectors of economic development and class relations. In response to this however we have ended up with a conjunctural free-for-all perpetually throwing up new social forces and phenomena, irreducible to the economic and class relations, whose cultural practices and challenges force us continually to recast our analytical and strategic priorities. To borrow some of Hall's own favourite formulae,

this has ‘swung the pendulum’ too far the other way, whereas a mid-point or balance between these two unsatisfactory alternatives would have been better.

In accounting for such a trajectory we have had occasion to repeatedly note the malign influence of Ernesto Laclau. Initially however Hall seemed to be developing a less extreme position in his CCCS works, conducted from within the Althusserian framework of ‘relative autonomy of the superstructures’ and ‘determination in the last instance by the economic’. This licensed a series of analyses covering contemporary cultural developments and their external articulation with profound social and economic changes – the links between youth subcultures and the post-war trajectory of capitalism, the birth of cultural studies as an academic discipline and its recurrent reconfigurations. Culture was a ‘relatively autonomous’ terrain, both determined and determining, a theme deployed by Hall to read the relationship of mass media to the political superstructures.

His most famous work of this period, *Policing The Crisis*, attempted a conjunctural tracing of variable ruling class strategies of cultural and coercive power, in relation to a wider ‘radicalisation’ of society, a history of ‘challenge and response’ aiming to reveal the shifting basis of hegemonic power. In discussing contemporary modes of class formation Hall similarly related the emergence of new class fractions (the youth subcultures, the black wageless) and their cultural responses to wider social dynamics. Theoretically framing these concrete studies Hall produced a set of more abstract works covering the relevant modes of analysis necessary to conceptualise the social formation, class formation and racial structuring in their historically specific, complex configurations.

This doesn't mean these works were problem-free. His concrete analyses contain the beginnings of a destabilising preference for the conjunctural as opposed to more organic moments in the 'analysis of concrete situations'. This is evident both strategically in the call to attend to the 'repertoires of resistance' currently displayed by subordinate class fractions, and analytically in his treatment of contemporary modes of class formation where these new class fractions (youth subcultures, the black wageless) are given priority over any current developments in the body of the working class. The CCCS cultural studies display impressive theoretical frameworks to conceptualise class - culture and media - society relationships. They are however at times held back by a significant under-representation of the impact of the economic level and its impact upon cultural production (for example in the circuit of communication described in Encoding-Decoding). Hall's treatment of youth subcultures is also notable for its mismatch of analytical sophistication and their marginality as social forces, emblematic of a misplaced ingenuity on his part (1). He would have been more politically useful deploying this approach in relation to the cultural development of the core of the class.

Another substantial drawback these works contain is their failure empirically to investigate and establish the scope and size of the social and cultural phenomena under discussion. This absence is one found right across the board – in relation to youth subcultures, the revolt of the black wageless, the effects of mass media on socially differentiated audiences and the impact of ruling class strategies of cultural power, in particular the 'moral panics' around youth and mugging, and their role in creating a populist base for political projects of social restoration. This process was evident even within CCCS itself, as the subsequent history of Hall's Encoding-Decoding model of the mass media and its empirical

mobilisation by David Morley showed. Significant problems were encountered here by Morley, beyond Hall's initial abstract characterisation (on this see Morley 1992 p7-14, 133-137 and McGuigan 1992 p131-136). Without any attempt to empirically ground and substantiate the new phenomena Hall urges the Left to address in theory and practice, they lack the status of vital arenas for intervention he ascribes to them.

Having said all that, I would still suggest that Hall's contribution to the analytical development of Marxism lies within these works rather than their successors. As for his strategic contribution, there is less to recommend. Focusing only upon the divisive impact of new class fractions and the prospects for cultural intervention within the dominant institutions of the mass media, Hall did not offer us any likely avenues of political advance, a conclusion at significant variance to his self-conception as a modern-day, politically engaged 'organic intellectual'.

The works of the 1980s witness a significant slippage towards a form of analysis and strategy that departs from the Althusserian model, terminating in an idealist vision of social life and its modes of reproduction and transformation. Here the delicate balancing act established in Althusser's framework cedes to a focus upon the autonomous power of ideology and cultural politics to affect social life under the prevailing influence of Ernesto Laclau. A serious distortion of the work of Gramsci also becomes evident, as Hall recruits him as a forerunner of his own, very different vision of a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. A definite shift away from traditional concerns on the determining powers exercised by social structures, material institutions and political organisations over political projects now occurs. Recasting the political realm as one of open-ended possibilities, Hall implied



historical success depended solely upon the development of effective political and cultural strategies to master a given array of conjunctural forces, hence becoming a 'Marxism without Guarantees'. But this move ended up obscuring the material bases of contemporary ruling class strategies to reorder capitalism (in the guise of Thatcherism) and the equally constrained options facing Left responses – the 'material infrastructure' or context of hegemonic politics, centred upon fundamental class relations (2). Such a voluntarist celebration of human agency lacked any sound theoretical basis given Hall's alignment with the Structuralist – post-Structuralist trajectory of anti-humanism and was equally unable to recognise the enabling role of social structure in the historical deployment of collective action, registering only its inert status as constraint. The resulting voluntaristic perspective provided no convincing advance over deterministic adversaries.

His passion for historical specificity extended the tendencies towards conjuncturalism found in the CCCS works, with both objective and subjective new realities altering the environment for Left theory and practice (those of Thatcherism, post-Fordism and the rise of the new social movements). The impact of these new phenomena is never satisfactorily established through structural and empirical analysis. Consequently Hall dramatically overestimated the significance of Thatcherism as a political force and called for a new version of Left politics based upon new arenas and social sites that is not theoretically secured or possessed of any strategic discrimination in its move beyond class-based strategies. His favoured principle of the 'articulation of theory and history' here displays its radical insufficiency as a theoretical and strategic guide to master the 'concrete situation'. In opposition to class reductionist treatments of the social formation, Hall now made an explicit shift to a model of a plural social order containing many social antagonisms and

forces, irreducible to class, whilst also suggesting a fundamental recomposition of existing class cultures, communities and political solidarities was underway. Neither of these dynamics received substantial empirical or structural investigation, producing a number of distortions. The class basis of Thatcherism was occluded; contemporary developments within the bulk of the working class ignored. As for the new social configuration, Hall identified certain arenas and sites for political intervention ('the popular', the range of new social movements active in civil society) but definitely exaggerated their open-endedness and availability for variable political recruitment as well as their relevance to particular political projects. Uncharted theoretically, Hall's discussions gave us only a 'concrete situation' lacking 'concrete analysis'.

Under the influence of Laclau, Hall's perspective on culture and ideology took a decisive turn, invoking unilateral powers of 'discursive articulation' as creator of ideological ensembles, social interests and identities, as well as collective subjects. Their 'double articulation' and external constitution here slipped from our view, significantly altering traditional Left positions on 'class -ideology' and 'culture - politics' relations. The discursive pole now became the sole effective force in each of these couplets. Having dismissed the material and structural bases of ideologies and cultural politics, Hall inflated the scope for cultural intervention until it covered the totality of politics, underwriting this with an implausible view of ideologies (both popular and elite) as ensembles of undetermined, class-neutral elements ever available for differential political recruitment. In a related move he wanted the Left to recognise the expansion of the sites for political action where power is constituted and transformed. His own work however was restricted solely to an analysis of the struggle for consent and cultural power. This narrow optic

screened out the non-consensual basis of Thatcherism's rule and bequeathed to the Left a one-dimensional cultural politics, insufficient to counter strategically existing configurations of ruling class power. Furthermore this 'cultural politics' was itself reduced to an academically-based strategy of 'discursive articulation and rearticulation' that had no connections at all to the daily institutional, organisational and material realities of those oppressed groups it courted.

The global reach of Marxist theory and practice – its aim to grasp the totality of society and strategically transform it through identifying social forces possessing definite powers, capacities and interests, and developing these further – is one Stuart Hall has abandoned. In its place we have only some elements of an alternative model, conjoining cultural politics, voluntarist perspectives on the political realm, and a conjuncturalist focus on new and ephemeral social forces and processes to be mastered. They do not add up to a coherent and convincing alternative, or even provide plausible analysis and strategic conclusions within their own particular restricted realms – for example 'contesting' the cultural terrain. Even 'without Guarantees', any future Marxism requires a return to the structural, material and organisational realities of social life and political practice Hall has ended up here suppressing.

Overall then, what can we say about Hall's performance as a renewer of Marxism? Is he more successful as an analyst than strategist, the view recently put forward by Chris Rojek? The picture is less straightforward. At the strategic level Hall has provided little of substance to guide contemporary political practices. His arguments against Althusser's separation of theory from practice have not been converted into any meaningful

reunification, even in the ‘non-identical’ form he advocated – the latter clause being a device to ensure a ‘relative autonomy’ for theory. There has been little danger of such an identity cramping Hall’s room for theoretical manoeuvres. In place of a prospective ‘complex unity’ we have repeatedly witnessed their disunity, as Hall imparts to new social forces and phenomena the status of political agents that is way beyond their actual powers and capacities to deliver social change. Even more problematic, in his later works he dismissed traditional Left sites for and forms of political intervention (party and state) without offering anything substantial in their place.

As critical analyst Hall’s merits are uneven. He wanted to produce a more complex and historically specific mode of Marxist analysis. This he certainly did, but there is more to say. His concrete investigations during the CCCS period deploy elaborate theoretical frameworks to read contemporary cultural and social developments, and they do contain interesting insights and suggestions. However they are seriously held back by their lack of any empirical grounding or confirmation of the dynamics, processes and historical outcomes Hall describes. We have seen this analytical deficit in relation to the treatment of modes of social resistance from below (youth subcultures, the revolt of the black wageless) as well as ruling class cultural responses from above (‘moral panics’ and the movement for social restoration). Some of these works also show a marked absence of the role of the economic as a determining force in social life – for example, his treatment of the mass media – despite Hall’s overarching theoretical commitment to *expand* our appreciation of the range of operative factors and processes in the constitution and reconstitution of social relations.

The works of the next decade witness a further extension of his focus on historical specificity, to an excessive degree. The accompanying notion of a complex social formation composed of many effective determinations now gives way to a de facto idealist focus upon ideologies and culture, celebrating their expansive powers of social and political constitution. As a result Hall undertakes no substantial structural investigation of the new social realities he invokes as the ground for contemporary political practice. Taken in tandem with his continuing unwillingness to empirically ground the social and cultural processes he outlines (for example the popular impact of Thatcherism), we are left with no substantive ‘concrete analysis’ of the ‘concrete situation’ now confronting Left theory and political practice. In the light of this, it is in his earlier CCCS works that we must look solely for Hall’s analytical contribution to the development of Marxism.

## 2

### **Consequences and Controversies**

Hall’s failure to develop genuine alternatives does not allow us to revert to traditionalist approaches within Marxism. He was working on a set of real theoretical problems even if he could not solve them satisfactorily. What then is to be done about its tendencies towards reductionism, determinism and universalism? We cannot fully engage with these issues here – that would take another full-length investigation. What we can do however is point

towards some alternative solutions, or lines open to further exploration in relation to each of the trends Hall identified.

In doing so, we can draw on the works of other critical thinkers who have also sought to develop alternative positions within the Marxist framework. For Hall was not a lone voice in the decades of the 1970s and 80s calling for such a rethinking. Many others then, and still today, have set out new directions for its theoretical development. Contemporary with Hall's efforts were those of the likes of Derek Sayer and Jorge Larraín. Even now, despite the marked shift away from Marxism in critical academia, there are those undertaking relevant theoretical work to the set of problems we are concerned with here. I will refer to the work of Jonathan Joseph as an example of this below. My brief discussion of these analytical issues will take each of the trends Hall was concerned with in turn, starting with the question of universalism and historical specificity.

## **The Concrete Analysis of Concrete Situations**

In our discussion of Hall's repudiation of universalism we noted a significant difference between his conjuncturalist treatment of the concrete and that of Gramsci. The commitment to grasping the historical particularities of Italian capitalism found throughout Gramsci's works showed a more balanced appreciation of the combinations of organic-structural and conjunctural moments that together make up a 'concrete situation'. Hence his theoretical identification of the key structural forces capable of effecting social change (workers and peasants), and a concern for their contemporary development, which refused to be sidetracked by conjuncturally visible practices of subordinate class forces (that is, banditry

and adventurism within the peasantry). This perspective, critically absent in Hall's work, offers a valuable starting point for analytically reorienting the theme of historical specificity back towards a more viable and politically significant role within Marxism. We do need to grasp the concrete shape of given social relations and processes in order to master them theoretically and practically as Hall argued. However this entails far more than attending only to their novel elements.

Now there was already a potential model for Hall to follow in adapting the Gramscian line to the analysis of contemporary capitalism in Britain. This was the infamous analysis of the 'peculiarities' of the English form developed by Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn in the 1960s (on which see Anderson 1965; Nairn 1972; an historical updating of this model was offered by Anderson in Anderson 1987, 1990A and 1990B). Hall never discussed this option to any great degree – but we do know from the contemporary work of his CCCS colleague Richard Johnson that it was viewed in a hostile light at the Centre in terms of its mobilisation of the concept of hegemony (Johnson 1980). Without wishing to enter this debate, I think what we can unequivocally say is that the Anderson-Nairn approach at least avoided the mistakes Hall made in identifying the 'concrete situation' primarily with its conjunctural phenomena, excluding the level of organic social relations and structural bases. Quite where we go from this base-line must await further analytical and strategic exploration.

## **A Marxism Without Guarantees?**

Hall's aversion to structural determinism within Marxism led him towards a model of social life and political practice that was resolutely 'without guarantees', an historically open-ended optic insisting upon the varying political possibilities existing within any given concrete situation. This was achieved at the great cost of downgrading the structural context of political action to a virtual inoperativeness, exercising no constraints or limitations, nor even providing any definite powers and capacities to propel such action. If Hall has here swung too far towards the pole of contingency, what other avenues can be opened up for Marxist analysis and strategy?

One option we have already mentioned concerns a theoretical reworking of the core terms of 'agency' and 'structure' underpinning social analysis. As we saw, there have been significant developments at both these poles, reframing our understandings of the constrained nature of human agency (doubly determined by social and natural processes) and the enabling role of social structures in the historical unfolding of collective action. From such a theoretical perspective we may be able to grasp the impact of both polarities upon processes of social reproduction and transformation better than hitherto.

A more recent intervention by Jonathan Joseph on the nature of the concept of hegemony also promises to be fruitful. He argues that hegemony involves not just strategies of political or cultural intervention (the option favoured by Laclau and Mouffe and adopted by Hall) but also the structural relations and conditions which define their historical possibilities.



“To properly conceive of hegemony it is necessary to locate it within structural relations which make clear its limitations and conditions of possibility.....

Post-Marxism, post-structuralism and deconstruction do not allow for such a project.....they deny the necessary conditions for hegemony’s meaningful operation, i.e. relatively enduring social structures, practices, interests, identities and relations.....

Hegemony is therefore not reducible to a role as articulator of discourse. The nature of such a project is defined by the relations between social structures, human practices and group interests” (Joseph 2002 p120-121).

Joseph goes on to elaborate this distinction between hegemonic projects and their structural conditions in terms of a dual understanding of hegemony as surface and structural phenomenon. Crucially he argues that their interrelation is one characterised by ‘emergence’. The conscious projects focused upon by Hall and co have their own irreducible dynamics but they cannot be understood apart from the deeper structural requirements for social reproduction, and their particular, variable ways of meeting these material conditions. For Joseph what is significant about Thatcherism is not its all-conquering cultural power, or even its successful responses to an emerging post-Fordist social order – the predominant and occasional strands in Hall’s texts respectively. Rather Thatcherism illustrates the *failure* of an hegemonic project to align itself fully with new economic trends and facilitate effective capital accumulation, the question of Europe and the single market being its downfall here (Joseph op cit p125-133, 191-194).

In the light of this alternative approach to hegemony we can see that the historical conditions of possibility Hall sought to reclaim in the guise of a ‘Marxism without Guarantees’ are more limited and constrained by a deeper, structural level at which hegemony also operates. There may be no guarantees of historical inevitability for Marxism as theory and practice to rest upon, but there are equally powerful material barriers, obstacles and opportunities it must reorient itself towards. In doing so, the arena of

socialist strategy will necessarily cover more than 'cultural politics' in its calculations, a more global approach involving economic, social and organisational realities, as displayed in the pre-prison writings of Gramsci.

## **The Terrors of Reductionism**

As virtual signature of Hall's entire intellectual career, the threat of economic reductionism has featured prominently in his works covered here. The studies of culture and political projects he developed in response are premised upon their historical effectivity and irreducibility to the economic. Those of the 1980s took this so far as to render any continuing determinations exercised by economic or structural processes and relations inoperable, an idealist retreat we should not emulate. Prior to this Hall was concerned to employ the Althusserian framework of 'relative autonomy' to grasp the double articulation of cultural forms. And it must be said, that some of CCCS works convincingly relate this double articulation, for example the treatment of youth subcultures and media-state relations.

There are a number of issues to address here. Firstly, we must consider the viability of the Althusserian model. Now many critics have seen this as licensing a shift to a de facto idealist approach, concentrating solely upon the internal configuration of particular social practices, such as culture, at the expense of their relations with other social levels, especially the economic (Sparks 1996). The evidence in Hall's CCCS works is uneven. He does sometimes feature the external articulation of cultural forms, but can also be guilty of ignoring economic aspects elsewhere. Jonathan Joseph has recently suggested that we

replace the Althusserian framework with its disabling tendencies towards analytical separation and abandonment of a totalising approach, with a critical realist model of 'social combinations'. This breaks with notions of 'autonomy' (relative or otherwise) and examines the specificity of given structures in relation to their determination by the larger whole (Joseph 2002 p118-119,165-169). He goes on to illustrate such an approach with the example of the economic development of British capitalism and its crucial dependence on other social structures (state strategies for example) in the post-war era (op cit p183-194). For our concerns here, perhaps such a reworking of the Althusserian passion for 'complex wholes' in social analysis could be fruitfully developed in relation to cultural analysis, drawing upon the critical realist notion of 'emergence'? Cultural processes and forms can possess their own emergent and irreducible properties without these coming to be analysed in isolation from other social levels, such as the economic, with which they are intrinsically related, or taken to be of unrealistic political significance. If we can put the cultural genie back into such a theoretical framework, it could be beneficial to us both analytically and strategically.

On this latter point, such a shift would also lead us necessarily away from the one-sided and abstracted practice of cultural politics Hall has come to uphold. Aren't his strategies of contestation, 'disarticulation-rearticulation', etc, carried out within dominant institutions, based precisely upon notions of the autonomy of culture from other social levels, to license theoretically such a practice? And if we abandon the autonomy framework, restoring the economic limitations to 'counter-hegemonic' media interventions, won't we be led to look elsewhere, beyond such sites to develop new interventions upon terrains less constrained by corporate dynamics, say in communities of oppressed groups? In addition won't such

practices have to be complemented with others tackling given economic, institutional and organisational barriers and structures that continue to circumscribe our political possibilities?

The lesson is surely that Hall's flight from economic reductionism has led him to a wildly over-exaggerated perspective upon the formative role of culture in the constitution and reconstitution of social relations. As a 'relatively' and then allegedly 'absolutely' autonomous social practice it has been presented to us as an historically effective force apparently of equal import to other well-established powers (economic and political). This has been a serious mistake we need to recognise and analytically rein-in.

### 3

## **Marxism Today?**

Hall's rejection of reductionism did not just cover its economic variant. His works of the 1980s were equally concerned to avoid any identity of class relations with an emerging new plural social order, composed of a multitude of social forces and antagonisms, and a fundamental recomposition of class and its political solidarities. This vision of a society beyond class reductionism was one that Hall could not substantively chart. Beyond that however, many (too many) others have similarly argued that contemporary society no longer rests upon the axes of class relations, implying that any future Left political strategy

cannot be based upon class politics but must find other agents. In the wake of their critiques and a whole host of social and economic changes unfolding since the time of Hall's 'Marxism without Guarantees', we must consider seriously the charge that a Marxism for today is an unlikely, if not impossible project. If that is indeed so, then what political purpose does our critical review of Hall's efforts serve in a 'concrete situation' where Marxism and class-based political strategies are historically redundant?

We do indeed confront some large issues here, ones that cannot be addressed in full in the confines of a concluding chapter alone. Nevertheless we must make some efforts to defend the political implications of our critique of Hall's Marxist alternative.

The first point to note is that the consignment of Marxism and class politics to the historical dustbin is a charge that has repeatedly been made by a succession of critics, only to be itself undermined by the recurrence of class struggles. In this line of thinking, many have also identified other potential agents of social change to take the place of class, only for their political hopes to be unrealised – say, for instance, Marcuse and the students. Hall's later works clearly belong in this tradition, but that is not sufficient to prove our case.

Rather we must stress that those wishing to argue for the historical supersession of Marxism as theory and political practice centred on class provide us with a thorough structural and empirically grounded analysis of the social changes that have dislodged class from its central role, and also an equally comprehensive treatment of any new social forces identified as potential agents of social change. As we know Hall's works of the 1980s failed to provide either of these, fatally undermining their theoretical and political persuasion and coherence. We need at least that 'concrete analysis of concrete situations'

Hall accurately identified as a key objective of Marxism but failed to deliver, whether we are working within this tradition *or* outside it.

Now there is no shortage of potential candidates in contemporary critical thought, notwithstanding the significant decampment of a substantial body of erstwhile critical academia to the idealist wilderness of post-structuralism and post-modernism. One recent intervention by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt 'Empire' brings together many of the strands of argument for writing off the working class and replacing it with a new agency, one consisting of a disparate alliance of different forces and collectivities they describe as 'the multitude' (Hardt and Negri 2000).

Writing as supporters of the burgeoning anti-capitalist movement who are responding critically to the spread of globalised economic, social and cultural processes, Hardt and Negri argue the old industrial working class no longer embodies the potential for political transformation. In a rapidly changing and increasingly interconnected global world, the industrial proletariat has lost its central place at the heart of the capitalist economy. The service sector of an informationally based economy is now predominant, with its highly-skilled, knowledge-based workforce. Furthermore, capital has been able to radically to expand its territories of operation across the globe, undermining job security and the political ability of groups of workers to respond to their conditions of employment from within vanishing settled communities and cultures of solidarity. However from within the many different, fragmented social localities and sites affected by the overarching dynamic of globalisation, a new equally disparate and fragmented collectivity has arisen to challenge capital, in the shape of a decentralised and localised 'multitude' (as summarised in Harman 2002).

This summary certainly appears to identify many familiar trends occurring in the contemporary world – but is it a theoretically and strategically sound alternative? Writing within the tradition of Classical Marxism, the likes of Alex Callinicos and Chris Harman have disputed many of the key themes Hardt and Negri describe, claiming that class politics and Marxism are still resolutely necessary to accurately conceptualise and challenge today's 'concrete situation' (3).

In relation to the 'condition of the working class' Harman argues it is actually expanding on a global scale, up to an estimated figure of between 1.5 to 2 billion people. The widespread belief in the deindustrialisation of advanced capitalist economies rests upon a number of mistaken assumptions. Declining numbers of industrial workers in some countries (such as Britain) are here taken as representative of a general trend – whereas in others there has been an actual growth (the US) and, overall, little decline in evidence. Furthermore the shift from manufacturing to service employment hides the continuing importance of the former sectors in capitalist economies – its increased productivity per worker, continuing strategic location and power base for working class resistance, as well as the recategorisation of forms of work as 'services' that has not altered the fundamental nature of the actual manual work involved (fast-food provider in the retail sector versus food packager in a factory). It also neglects to address the increasing proletarianisation of 'service' employment, away from visions of highly-skilled work. As for notions of flexible and increasingly precarious employment, reflecting one-sidedly a succession of economic crises and capitalist-led restructuring, these have drastically over-exaggerated the power of capital to snuff out capacities for working class resistance and struggles at the point of

production, and its ability to physically relocate its operations in cheaper, less combative sites for production (Harman 2002 p3-14; Callinicos 2003 p95-98).

Outside the advanced capitalist zone Harman describes the uneven development of a 'world working class' within the so-called Third World. Here certain regions have seen negligible growth or even decline – in particular Sub-Saharan Africa - whilst others have witnessed an economic trajectory combining recognisable forms of wage labour with more 'informal' modes of employment and self-employment (such as India and Latin America). The fundamental determinant of this complex arrangement lies in the relative lack of expansion in labour-intensive modes of capital accumulation currently unfolding on a world scale. Relations between these different sectors are variable. Some transfer of work to the informal sector has definitely occurred, but casual employment has long been a feature of capitalism – and it does not necessarily rule out prospects for class struggle and determined resistance (as seen in the history of the British dockers). In certain circumstances effective links have been forged between sectors and class struggles mounted, one instance being the South Korean textile workers in the late 1980s (Harman op cit p14-24).

Harman concludes that the working class on a world scale remains a viable political agent (4). By way of contrast 'the multitude' invoked by Hardt and Negri as its historical successor is an imprecise and indeterminate social category, a disparate collection of disaffected groups united only by their rejection of globalisation, which lacks any definite structural basis or leverage to effect change



“A disparate collection of forces has come together to provide a new and massively important focus for the struggle against the system after two decades of defeat and demoralisation.

But the glorification of disparateness embodied in the term prevents people seeing what needs to be done next to build the movement. It does not recognise that what was so important about Genoa and Barcelona was the beginning of the involvement of organised workers in the protests.....

The mistake is to see movements of disparate social groups as ‘social subjects’ capable of bringing about a transformation of society. They are not. Because their base is not centred in collective organisation rooted in production, they cannot challenge the control over that production which is central to ruling class power. They can create problems for particular governments. But they cannot begin the process of rebuilding society from the bottom-up” (Harman 2002 p26).

And as Callinicos goes on to point out, this ‘anti-capitalist’ movement praised by Hardt and Negri is a heterogeneous body not only in terms of its constitution but also in terms of its aims and objectives. These cover the nature of the system they confront and the means of organisation to defeat it (Callinicos 2003A p67-105). What we can conclude from his survey of its different components and political visions is that the ‘anti-capitalist ‘multitude’, no less than Hall’s plurality of oppressed groups, is not a coherent and convincing alternative agency to undertake radical social change.

Perhaps we could, at last, begin to take a more sceptical and inquiring stance towards new social forces and phenomena that appear to offer novel political challenges to the contemporary social order, and recurrently arise in the on-going development of capitalism. Would that not be a more realistic orientation to adopt than repeatedly rushing to embrace the new, junk most of our established analytical and strategic baggage – only to end up disappointed by their failure to fulfil our theoretically ungrounded expectations?

## Notes

1. In this Hall shows his affinity to Structuralist treatments of popular culture per se, from Roland Barthes onwards. A hilarious example of this can be found in Richard Middleton's treatment of pop music, with its recruitment of a legion of theoretical sources to 'decode' the hidden complexities and implications of three-chord bashes (Middleton 1990).
2. As a concrete example consider the contrast between the later work of Colin Leys on the market-inspired restructuring of public sector broadcasting and the NHS and Hall's position (Leys 2001). There were equally drastic moves to reorganise higher education along similar lines underway during the 1980s and 90s, with significant consequences for the work of an academically-based 'critical practitioner' like Hall. However we would search in vain for any sustained discussion of this economic disaster in Hall's works, despite the 'reworking' of the 'conditions of production' he laboured under. As for his political response to such a dynamic, we are equally uninformed.
3. As for the underlying political economy invoked by Hardt and Negri, notions of an 'informationalised' economy have become increasingly common in the last decade or so, found both at the level of low grade political apologetics (Charles Leadbetter) and in more theoretically robust forms, as in the work of Manuel Castells. In a critical review of Castells, Alex Callinicos suggests his vision of a 'new economy' is overdrawn and unable to grasp the real significance of contemporary economic changes. Castells has argued that a qualitative break in socio-economic life is underway, producing a new mode of development for capitalism, 'informationalism' where the increased deployment of knowledge and complex information processing are characteristic of economic activity. To substantiate this shift he has been forced to rely however on an old and discredited theoretical standby – an autonomous technological dynamic – that neglects the continuing hold of the priorities of capital accumulation and profit maximisation over contemporary economic changes, such as complex information processing (Callinicos 2001 p32-35). Much of Castells argument rests upon his over-estimation of the impact of the IT revolution as equivalent in its social effects to that of the original Industrial Revolution. Citing the work of Robert Gordon, Callinicos suggests this so-called revolution has not had the dramatic impact upon economic growth its legion of supporters claim for it, nor can it match the range of historical inventions and their impact that the technologies of the Second Industrial Revolution (emerging in the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries) had upon social life (op cit p39-42).

A wider review of the current literature on the so-called 'weightless' economy, and its 'dematerialisation' into forms of knowledge-led production, by Ursula Huws allows us to better estimate the actual extent of such historical shifts in the forms of capitalist economic organisation. Huws argues that much of the effect of this new thinking rests upon an illicit identification of the rise of service employment with knowledge-based production assuming dematerialised forms. Some careful distinctions need to be made in the face of such claims, and reinserted into our analysis in order to reach a more balanced verdict on their empirical extent.

First of all we need to recognise that not all service work is the same, three definite sub-categories being evident that contain different and contradictory tendencies. In the first of these ‘socialised domestic work’ (health and child care, cleaning and catering) there is a substantial process of further commodification and materialisation underway, embodying household tasks into commodified products, with little evidence of skilled, knowledge-based activity in their manufacture.

A second sector charged with reproducing the knowledge workforce (the realms of education, training and research and development) is certainly knowledge-led, but it is also witnessing trends towards commodification and standardisation of such knowledge. It is in the third domain, the increasing knowledge work involved in the production of physical and ‘weightless’ commodities and services that the new economy theorists have shown most interest, taking some of the trends evident here to stand for the whole of the service sector. Even here further distinctions are necessary. It has been claimed that physical commodities now derive most of their value from their design, branding and marketing, done by specialist knowledge workers. Huws suggests that this actually reflects the presence of two other long recognised processes in capitalist production – the super-exploitation of assembly workers (often in Third World locations) and the further extension of the elaborate division of labour in manufacture – rather than being a harbinger of a new economic order.

In terms of less material commodities, much has been made of the rise of the call centre selling intangible products (travel, insurance) or providing information and technical assistance. Despite the vast application of new IT here the resulting deskilled operations have produced only the “Taylorised, deskilled descendants of earlier forms of office worker” (Huws 1999 p40) rather than creative knowledge workers. Other sectors of non-material service production do embody more creative processes – software programming, financial speculation, artistic creation – but these activities are not fundamentally different from earlier forms of creative labour, and are not an empirically substantial part of the workforce (a point confirmed by Harman 2002 p8-9). Far more prevalent are trends towards the proletarianisation of service employment, using standardised computing and IT technologies to carry out routine information processing (Huws 1999 p32-44).

We can conclude from this brief survey that the case for a new economic reality beyond the imperatives of capital accumulation, the continual production of physical commodities and the predominant role of routinised labour in their creation has not been proven.

4. For further discussion of the contours and composition of the working class see the debate between Callinicos and Wright and Brighouse in *Historical Materialism*.

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